

Oakwood is a South Dakota State  
University production of creative arts  
and literature.

Editors

Steve Binkley  
Sara Deutscher  
Amber Easton

Literary Advisors

Dr. Christine Stewart-Nunez  
Dr. Todd Tietchen  
Dr. Michael Keller

Witherington Creative Writing Contest  
Desiree Weber

Department Head, English  
Dr. Kathleen Donovan

Executive Art Director  
Siri Boyd

Graphic Designer  
Molly Althoff

Graphic Design Advisors

Tim Steele  
Randy Clark

Special Thanks

Kathie Prah  
Paul Chapman  
Chris Daugaard and  
The SDSU Student Association

Copyright ©2008, South Dakota State University  
Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited

# CONTENTS

Oakwood, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2008], Art. 1

## Poetry

Post-Modern Popculture Hell .....	1
Amour de mi Alma .....	2
Raspberry Orgasm.....	3
Lesbian and Horsehide.....	4
Swimming Pearl.....	6
Milk Maids Coming-of-Age .....	7
Implements of Our Past.....	8
Badlands .....	10
The Common Cold.....	11
Early Rise .....	12
And He Never Came Back .....	13
Nature.....	14
4 Haiku .....	15
The Warmth .....	16
Unrequited.....	18
Speed of Light .....	20
Him in White .....	21
Tears .....	22
Daddy .....	24
Love's Cherry Blossom .....	26
Untitled .....	28
Billy Blue Jean .....	29
A Pohm .....	30
Shot .....	32
Boy's Club: Check Your Maturity at the Door .....	33



## Prose

Excommunication of a Dream .....	37
The Barn .....	39
Dust I.....	42
Dust II.....	43

## Short Story

Last Chance .....	45
Last Chance—Revisited .....	50
The Attack.....	55
Jenny's Trees.....	66
The Drift.....	71
An Old Tome .....	75
Home .....	78
Through the Gap .....	85
Switching Flights .....	92
Mercy .....	96
Uncomfortable Shoes .....	103

## Witherington Creative Writing Contest

Left Behind.....	121
Where I Come From.....	122
Tire Swing .....	123
More Than It Seems .....	124
Untitled .....	127
A Brother's Love .....	130





## Post-Modern Popculture Hell

Jace Williams

i woke up this afternoon and felt like oreillys guest  
turn on the tube and watch the news see hanna montana  
poses rebels and terrorists scatter the neighbors cat Gores too fat  
ive become mona lisas mustache a hyphen in popculture im no person  
just a consumer in a see of consumers consuming vanilla coke too much smoke  
need some vinyl rope while i pound out poetry on a computer and in a brawl gang  
for my sins I pilgrimage to ur with gilgamesh to ask forgiveness of the pope divine  
afterward i drink fruit flavored white tea and know theres no one left to turn to  
conrads a racist nietzsches depressed gibrans a muslim tzus too obscure  
my confession means nothing so i flip through time to waste time  
because anthologies are only writers greatest hits  
and now im slothrop chasing rainbows  
with dr phil and oprah who  
tell me that i should  
be a campbells can  
on a canvas  
look  
closer  
nothing to see  
so i seek for the start  
why its happening to me  
couric says the apocoplis is now  
and then my pen begins to gently weep  
while i buy what im supposed to buy and buy  
i wait for the foghorn to blow to know i can go home  
but the inventor of gatorade died so i watch what i should watch  
white noise fills my ears i gorge on glass and straw i correct where i can  
i had two and a half friends now theyre gone i love raymond does he love me  
for i am beowulf in a listless driftless x boomer latest greatest millennial generation  
soon enough ill be drinking knobs on the dark side of the moon with mickey and mellisa  
before then i want to play the tambourine but i have to change my name to jones instead  
hear the bells bells bells bells bells bells toll for me while i sail in a lead zeppelin  
and i float to hades entrance with virgil and ulysses and return with dedalus though  
we call three one one to discuss the life of the mind but theres no light tone meant for me  
oh please please wont someone cant someone help me out of post-modern popculture hell

## Amour de mi Alma

Meghan Miller

Amour de mi Alma  
Heard in song  
Soft sound, rolling rrr  
Implied possession, mi  
Sigh  
Clumsy tongue

Amour de mi Alma  
Letters hint  
Translation  
Clumsy tongue

Amour de mi Alma  
Inscribed tungsten  
Signature  
Clumsy tongue

Amour de mi Alma  
Silent cry  
Lover leave  
Clumsy tongue

Amour de mi Alma  
Love of my soul  
Soft sound, rolling rrr  
Implied possession, mi  
Scream  
Clumsy tongue

## Raspberry Orgasm

Meghan Miller

Raspberry sauce glistens  
Over silken sweet cheese  
Rich wine attends

Soft chink of china, musical  
Anticipation, fork poised  
To moist lips, ardent

Tongue caresses, rolls  
Richness, of promised  
Fruit, sugary and tart

Blended, Flavor unique  
Bitter-sweet dominance  
Bursts forth

Willing mouth, eager hand  
Reaches, swirls splendor  
Heaven-scented breath

Intoxicating essence,  
Compelling peaks, passionate  
Morsels, resonate.

## Lesbian and Horsehide

Donald Young

Hazy smoke filled air  
Dim lights, alcohol  
The oppressing crowd,  
Chatter, loud music, bottles clinking,  
The Noise.

Greasy dishwater blonde  
Hair hiding lucid eyes,  
Shapely lips moved,  
"I am from Maine."

"Did you ever meet Stephen King?"  
"He was my neighbor."  
"Really?"  
"Weird. He showed tours of his house on Halloween."  
"Wow."  
"He is quiet, and odd, kinda freaky."  
"Probably because he is different than you or me."

"You and I have the same hair."  
I touched it,  
Soft, silky, smooth, clean.  
"No we don't."

"Can I wear your jacket?"  
I handed her my stiff horsehide jacket.  
"It only cost me 20 bucks."  
"Here's 20."  
"It's yours."

Hands raised she twirled about:

"How do I look?"  
Ridiculous.  
She liked it.  
I laughed,  
"It looks good."

Hands on horsehide  
Pushing, pulling, adjusting  
Scuffs, creases  
Zipped her in.  
Slow finger over ink stain,  
"Now you are having second thoughts."  
"No, it's yours."

Face soft  
Eyes closed  
She leaned in  
Gentle lips touch mine

Eye to eye we stare  
Hazel sees Blue  
For a moment  
There is nothing

Silence  
Shyly she looks away.

Hazy smoke filled air,  
Dim lights, alcohol  
The oppressing crowd,  
Chatter, loud music, bottles clinking,  
The Noise.



## Swimming Pearl

Amber Easton

He walks past me.  
Ignores how I pirouette  
Bubbles wrap me, violent  
trickle, wet.  
Elegant Tahitian blue.  
Crimson highlights my sides.  
Rare pearl in plain view  
sparkling through sunlit blinds.

Flowing by my home,  
this dwelling deep,  
of white marble rocks, plastic dome.  
Musical bubble machine creeks.  
Repetitive nonsense. Again he walks by.

Maybe he will notice me,  
stop, chat,  
instead he leaves, does not take me.  
When he returns I'll be dead.  
Belly up.

Floating in despair.

## Milk Maids Coming-of-Age

Sara Deutscher

Smile, little sister,  
we're all grown up. Come.  
I'll show you how  
to walk as a fine high-heeled lady  
on a front porch should.

Listen. I'll explain the difference  
between crossing your legs  
and looking obscene,  
even in low-cut dresses  
that deserve real figures.

Spread the lipstick on thicker  
before discussing pie crust  
and foul women, how they admire  
our pearls, the car we came in.

We'll chase squinting boys  
across sunlit cow pastures,  
and kiss each one we catch,  
so let them run faster.

At chore time we'll shear, cut hay,  
plow, pitch, and group every counted  
egg from our fickle chicken's coup.

## Implements of Our Past

Meghan Miller

Implements of our past.  
It's a wonder what we keep!  
Hanging onto it,  
Laugh, weep.  
We say, "I might need that someday."  
Door from house,  
Gate for garden maze.  
Creeping vines that chip paint  
  
Old corn bin, to a child's mind  
Becomes a fort.  
Collection of things inside  
Rusted pipe, a gun  
Twine, a stick,  
Bow and arrow perfect.  
Leaves and twigs center piled  
Cozy imaginary fire  
Tarp to cover top  
Enclosing treasures  
In the "hidden" spot.

Triple box corn wagon set to rust in trees  
A coach headed west, to Indian Territory.  
The seventy five bushel  
Bucket, room for plenty.  
Team of horses  
Cycle bar mower,  
Single row cultivator,  
  
Hay stacker,  
Important lead team  
Potato planter and digger.  
  
Rusted seats, armatures of farm  
Lain forgotten  
Once again found  
Practicality, play  
Tool, toy  
Imagination  
Charm recognized.

## Badlands

Kelly Henkel

One thing that I did find out  
When I walked through the badlands  
I saw, what they say, the moon  
And it's all spires and caves  
Hardened sand,  
Spikes of dead grass,  
Old straggled hair sticking out  
Crusty nose holes,  
Dead dust when the land sneezes.  
Not the moon, really,  
It's a dead sea bed.  
So where did the buffalo find scuba gear?  
And how long can a prairie dog tread-salt-water?  
Blade sharp prairie grass,  
A thicker thin forest  
Standing strong but blowing in the current  
Like seaweed in the wind.

## The Common Cold

Dan Nguyen

Through my bedroom door  
I feel Elvis shaking  
The walls and I imagine  
Her on ocean blue chair  
Drinking coffee, eyes glued  
  
On Golden Girls, laughing  
While she loses bad  
In the kitchen, burning  
Gas on the stove  
Her empty yahtzee card  
  
And mine full. She dies  
When I share  
A new joke. I poke  
And prod, a brand new  
Stethoscope could not hear her  
  
Heart beating. It was cheap.  
Her eyes fall. She rasps  
To three twice, digs  
Down deeper; fills  
Wet lungs to seven and



## Early Rise

Erik Ebsen

Starting from sleep a woman rises,  
her bed-warm body silhouetting  
across a plain wall.  
Still fuzzy with sleep  
she stretches in the dim  
until her frame darkens against  
a pink and orange morning  
in a window behind her  
to collect herself,  
begin her day.

## And He Never Came Back

Benjamin Barondeau

"The older man who had asked us to keep his beautiful Shakespeare had not come back. So the book remained on our shelves just in case he ever returned." — Miep Gies, *Anne Frank Remembered*

And he never came back  
He never came back to reclaim  
His beloved Shakespeare  
He never came forth from the gates  
Of Auschwitz or Treblinka or Dachau  
Or wherever he was sent  
To take up his Shakespeare's words  
To clasp again in his hands  
And open the strong covers  
To tenderly turn and turn and turn  
The aging gilded pages  
To breathe the words bricked up  
In long columns of silence

He never came back  
To take from the shelf  
The leaves he hoped to preserve  
During his absence, his exile  
An absence extended and protracted  
Into infinity, eternity  
Nonbeing unending and forever –  
"Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never,  
Never, never"

## Nature

## 4 Haiku

Erik Ebsen

A fluffy cluster of whiteness,  
millions, millions of flakes.  
It wafts,  
a tiny agent built of ice and grit.

The air changes  
its mind from its maudlin beginnings,  
growing gray.

The wind blows from the north and west,  
new whiteness searing now with less grace.  
Students' hats are pressed  
onto heads.

That snowflake looks almost cute until it tries to eat your face.

Lori Jacobson

Al  
Not too bad at math,  
Terminally bad hair day,  
I am an Einstein.

Moo  
Pies made daily,  
Milk squirting in every direction,  
Cow-abunga!

No Fly Zone  
Flames shooting straight up,  
Twisted steel bums on the ground,  
Uh, I'll take the train.

Zap  
Half-moon glasses awry,  
Exciting key, burnt paper, string,  
Benji Franklin.

## The Warmth

Dan Nguyen

Sunlight augmented,  
Burning magenta  
Streaking spaces,  
Developing oranges,  
Yellows, and melon  
Glow on the wall.

Clouds perched high,  
Pale skin, perfect  
Thick body, warm  
Blankets miles away,  
Hanging like air  
Bubbles and music.

Ice enveloping naked  
Tree branches, white  
Lining, brittle bones  
Replacing soft wood,  
Now silver skeletons  
Melting into skylines.

Snow danced  
Like dying fireflies  
Teasing my eyes  
In exotic waves,  
Washing all of the  
Cold moments away.

Falling in form  
Unique and desolate  
Soon built force,  
Collecting strong  
To overthrow  
Tired toes.



## Unrequited

Nikki Vroman

Night and day  
switch.

Orange-purple glow  
enfolds.

Sea becomes sky-  
rolling waves fall and fade,  
a distant ship shrinks  
until it disappears.

Every star  
Connects,  
taking form.  
Images emerge.

Sun and moon  
collide  
casting eerie shadows  
across sheltered eyes.

Water bums,  
fire trickles  
red ribbons  
down a rocky slope.

Mountains cower,  
valleys rise,  
earth trembles.  
My knees, weak.

All these things on Earth can be  
though you refuse to see-  
my heart beats for you.  
Affection turns to apathy.

## Speed of Light

Allison Crisler

The romance of a star fades so fast.  
The twinkling eye of a gentle grandfather,  
Deft spy watching children wonder,  
And old men pontificate,  
And unspeakable holy sins of lovers.

The pervert watches from behind chintz curtains  
In a window of a far-off house,  
Matches telescope to telescope,  
And swaps gossip with the moon man.

The romance of a star fades so fast  
Once on man, floating along the rushing current  
In the silly old dark  
Without so much as the glow of a Bic,  
Comes close, measures his measures,  
And lets this thought drip down to his toes:  
"That is one big bonfire."

## Him in White

Amber Easton

Cold. Tingling  
in my legs  
like marching ants,  
like bees puncturing flesh

Someone stands in the door way  
I shutter, scream  
choked in my throat.  
He's dressed in a white suit,  
Yankee cap backwards.

Cemented. Afraid.  
Unable to raise an arm  
nor protest in words.  
To wake  
I sit up in bed.

He looks at me, tilts his head.  
My tears unshed.  
Sheets tangled with sweat. I sense  
I'm missed.

His look assures  
that his death was for  
America.  
My heart burns.  
He drifts away up golden stairs.

I drop to my knees.

## Tears

M.B.

He pulled up  
in his white Honda, leaned out  
his window in the May night,  
alcohol on his breath  
as we kissed. In the passenger seat  
I sipped a mixed drink.  
"Let's go for a drive."

On some back gravel road miles  
from people, we stop. Layer  
by layer, lose the clothes.  
He pulls me out  
of the car, weighs me down  
to the gravel. Rocks cut  
into my back. I see stars  
glow. "Stop." I say through  
clenched teeth. No one can hear  
me scream here. "Shh"  
he whispers, my arms trapped.  
"It'll all be over in a bit."

I try to find Orion's Belt.  
The stars spin. "Bye, Bye  
Miss American Pie" comes  
on the radio. My father sang  
me that lullaby.

At my house, I sit on the front  
steps, bleeding. The sun rises  
over the far hill, enveloping  
the valley in red clotted light.



## Daddy

Donald Young

Daddy died in a ditch along the Wyoming border.  
Beloved brother Donald suicide  
Hit in the head with a rock, brother Danny died.  
Father Harold paralyzed  
Empty casings at the feet of the U-boat gunner.  
Bishop takes pawn check

Daddy died in a ditch along the Wyoming border.  
What is this life for?  
Drunken misery.  
Married Starla  
Kids  
Donald Harold, Heidi Jane, Candace Lee  
Saigon can't shake Saigon.  
Knight takes bishop check

Daddy died in a ditch along the Wyoming border.  
Divorce  
Alcohol runs dry  
"Son look there is a Great Horned Owl"  
"Keep your shit-hooks off" written in the cover of his bible.  
"Tourists!" hand raised with feigned disgust.

False teeth on tongue pulled back a moment after you look  
Rook takes queen check

Daddy died in a ditch along the Wyoming border.  
Washington Redskins  
Headdress gift from the Great Sioux Nation  
Married Charlene  
Kids  
Bernice, Misty, Sabrina, Richard Worthington  
Poach deer, mouths to feed  
Road Construction, bills to pay  
5000 dollar roadgrader, investment  
King takes rook

Daddy died in a ditch along the Wyoming border.  
Cold, "Do you want to go home?"  
"Yes," calm.  
"I am sorry." tears.  
Knight takes pawn checkmate.  
Daddy died in a ditch along the Wyoming border.

## Love's Cherry Blossom

Meghan Miller

Like a bird,  
Delicate of bone.  
On a bough,  
Blossomed cherry tree  
Hops left, then right  
Head tilted, eyes dart

She wonders at the sight—  
Expanse of sky  
Clouds, sun.  
Looks again  
At the honesty love suggests

A decision  
She jumps, spreads wings.  
The wind lifts,  
Emotions soar

Thunk!

Stunned, catching breath  
She looks again  
Blue sky, radiant star.  
Love shines—  
Determined little thing.

Thunk!

Stunned, catching breath  
Heart beat fast  
Desire, love  
Again  
Flings hard  
  
Thunk!

Spirit broken  
Eyes glassy,  
Limp neck  
Lolls and turns  
Vision dims.  
Cherry blossoms  
Framed in blue sky.

## Untitled

Ashley Doescher

The arrangement seems odd.  
All in tune—  
Yet blasting imperfections in my ears.  
Perhaps we even find beauty in this?  
Perhaps just a scratch on the surface—  
But when it becomes the tear, the glass shattering—  
Pieces both sharp and jagged!  
That is when the beauty does not stop...  
But the world tainted momentarily.

## Billy Blue Jean

Stephen E. Snyder

billy plays in his old blue jeans  
in his parted greased hair, he plays  
the trumpet with fat, nimble fingers  
and sways to the sounds of the bass.

oh baby, oh baby, he says, and draws  
long drinks of dense air, pulling the cigar smoke  
and the hot sweat and the martini smell into  
his thick lungs. play the walls off boys,  
he says.

and all night the boys play the blues.  
billy brines with salt and peppers the  
girls sitting in the corner. and how sweet  
the music is! some of the sadness of being  
alive flies out of the old brass, hits the walls  
and floor, and crashes into the ears of a pleading brain.

billy blue jean sways to the dysfunctional orchestra,  
he taps his shoes on the sticky floor, and makes his trumpet  
cry a sorrowful tune. that's so sweet,  
he says into the microphone. so sweet, oh baby,  
how sweet it is to cry, and cut your soul,  
sing to me, oh baby, oh baby.



## A Pohm

### Camber Carpenter

To write a good poem, invoke the fair muse.  
Stanza and meter and rhyme you must use.  
Twist up the language and leave some words out.  
Don't say what you mean, but cause immense doubt.

Speak only of death, or nature, or love;  
anything other, please keep bereft of.  
Alliterate, assonate in metered iambs  
or try a pastoral, an ode to the lambs.

To be a good poet, keep open your mind  
and make up your own new system of rhyme.  
Force certain words to sound just the same,  
like been and seen, for poetical fame.

'Ere long, another thing to do  
is add a line for people who  
enjoy poetic lines to quote  
pretentiously, by heart, by rote.

So howl on the road less travelled by  
and as you take it, quoth and cry  
Nevermore! You'll sound so deep  
with miles to go before you sleep.

Epically mention man's first disobedience.  
Throw in a sonnet or ode for expedience.  
You're almost a poet, just give it some days.  
Scansion, caesura, start counting the ways

to write a great poem and be so profound  
academics will pester, incessantly hound  
you to go on a tour, the country traverse  
and share your unparalleled talent in verse.

## Shot

Josh Yocum

Sorry miss, I shot your son.  
It happened so fast,  
We sunk, together, into the floor.  
Flash of light, the deed done,  
Too late to turn back.

Sorry miss, I tried to save him.  
Widened eyes, blinded by starburst,  
Suddenly closed.  
The room crumbled;  
Rapture drug him down.

Sorry miss, he shot me first.  
Between the toes, our secret spot—  
Plunger poised, ready to do its worst,  
Odorless, tasteless, quick and deadly—  
Needle-sharp prick soon numbed.

Sorry miss, about your son.  
I'm ready to shoot again,  
Need overcomes fear—  
Plunger poised, emptied.  
Prick, starburst, rapture...

## Boy's Club: Check Your Maturity at the Door

A collection of poems by Matthew Jacobsen

### Ode to a Tommy Gun

O, Sweet Tommy gun  
I never tire of your rata tat tat,  
the destruction you leave  
filled with my passion to fire,  
Your drum clip like a shield  
to protect me from harm,  
Your extra handle  
I take hold to steady myself,  
You are there for me always  
Death pours forth from your barrel  
Together, we beat down all  
writing out their epitaphs  
in neat round .45 holes,  
me and my Chicago Typewriter.

## Games

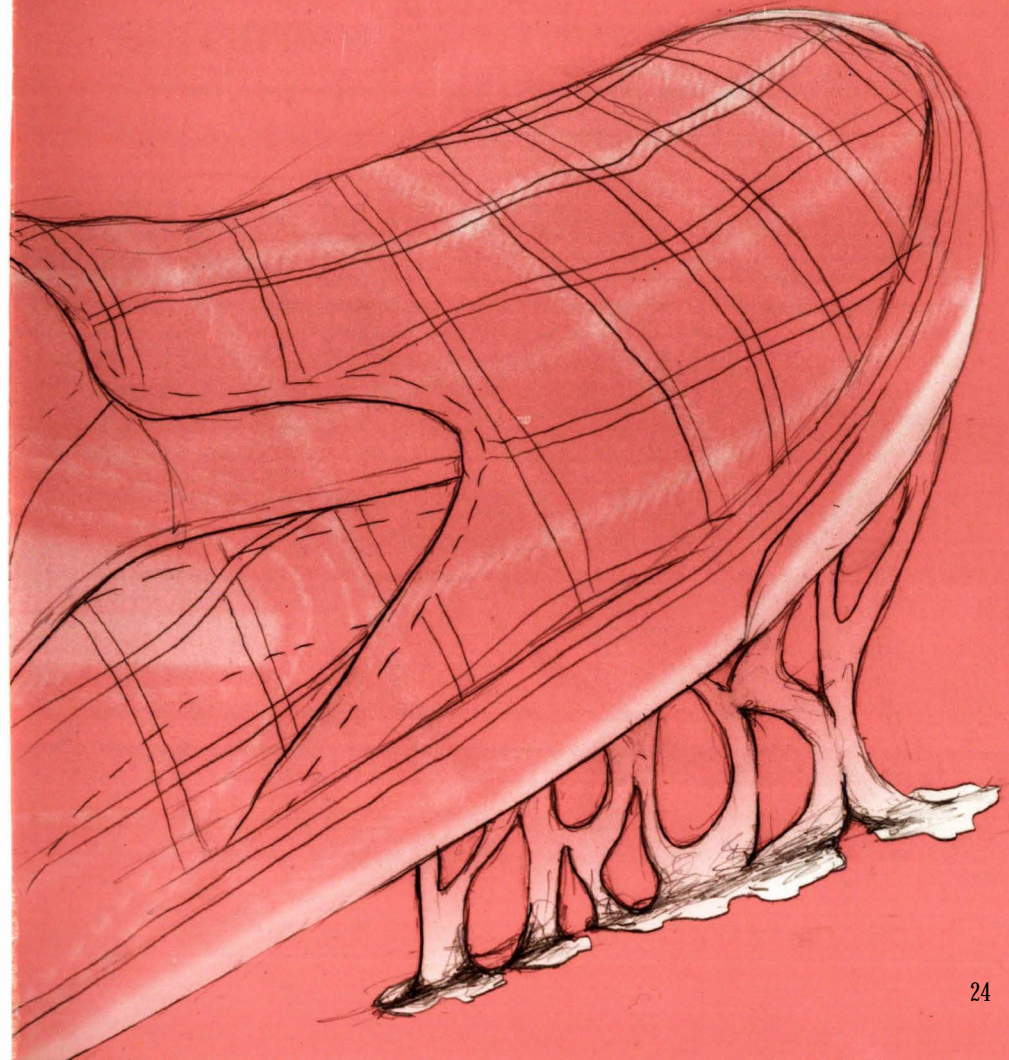
A girl was in my dorm room  
 Without a Solid Snake warning she pulled off  
 Her tank top and mini skirt with the grace of Zelda.  
 Slow but deliberate.  
 What she wore underneath was a tiny black bra and underwear that were  
 More decoration than function that would make Samus Aran happy.  
 She pulled up her Triforce-golden hair arching her Lara Croft body as she did.  
 She came toward me; and I could tell she smelled of Peach and Daisy.  
 She un-Sonic-ly pushed me back onto the couch and  
 Straddled me like an excite bike.  
 Her Jill Valentine legs rubbed against mine.  
 Her Dead or Alive chest heaved against mine.  
 Like two inflated Kirbies, they were about to break free.  
 Her full Mario-red lips were inches from mine.  
 But for some reason, all I could think about was  
 Slipping into a good video game.

## Relationship Pants

A relationship is a warm pair of pants.  
 One time pants. Recurring pants. Forever pants.  
 Boring but comfortable. Sweat pants.  
 Just plain weird. Clown pants.  
 Hot, dangerous, sweaty. Leather pants.  
 Patches. Rips. Holes.  
 Short term patches. Long term patches.  
 Few Patches. Many patches. Nothing but patches.  
 Occasional, "good" looking. Sunday pants.  
 Fun and playful. Night pants.  
 Lonely-night pants. Video game pants.  
 Professional, hopefully ironed. Suit pants.  
 Sexy, supportive, smart, comfortable, complimentary. The perfect pants.  
 The forever pants.

## Superhero Flight

The tress look so small below me.  
The beautiful blue sky above me.  
Even the birds don't fly this high.  
The warm sun on my face,  
the breeze blowing through my hair.  
I started to run, the dirt grinding under my boots.  
The edge of the cliff came fast and then, I leaped.  
Silence.  
But only for a second.  
My arms outstretched with nothing below me.  
Absolute freedom.  
There's only one problem, I can't fly.  
Soon I start to fall.  
The breeze, now a roar in my ears.  
The only other noise, the flapping of my T-shirt and jeans.  
The ground so far away comes up slowly at first,  
but soon is rushing toward me.  
I hit the ground in a cloud of dust and a shower of rocks.  
An animal runs into the trees, birds explode from the branches.  
Silence again...  
Slowly I pick up and look over myself,  
not to see if I've broken anything, I know I haven't. I never have,  
but to see what condition my clothes are in.  
I only have a rip in my shirt. I dust myself off and start back up the mountain.  
I have time for one more jump before it is dark.  
The sunset at the top will be beautiful.





## Excommunication of a Dream

Camber Carpenter

Today marks an important milestone for me. Today, I give up a dream held dear since childhood. At last the day has come when I must, regretfully, relinquish my dream of becoming Pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

Several reasons underlie this life-changing decision to let go of my ambition to pontificate. While my parents always insisted that I could be anything I wanted to be when I grew up, they tended to discourage me from following this particular dream. They cited the fact that I am female and Protestant, thus striking me out twice in regards to Pope qualifications. However, at the time I was much wiser than my parents and assumed them to be either sexist or intolerant of the Catholic faith. So why then have I decided to quit the quest to Popedom?

Most importantly, I do not speak enough languages fluently. The Pope can speak every language in the world, including but not limited to lost tribal languages of eastern African nations, unwritten languages spoken in Mexico, several dead languages, and Canadian. Then every year, for Jesus' birthday, he recites the story of Christmas in each of these languages in a service that lasts, on average, 17 days. Under-accomplished me, I speak only English, French, and a few words of Spanglish—clearly not enough to qualify me for that position.

The second most important thing about being the Pope that I could never do is wear hats. I have an oddly-shaped and oversized head, ill-suited

## The Barn

to pull off the magnificent headgear customarily worn by the Pope. This headgear, known as a miter, holds great significance in the Catholic Church. It distinguishes the Pope from other Pope-like people such as bishops and cardinals. The most evident characteristic of the miter is its height. The average miter rises a whopping 1.5 meters above the Papal head. So if I did win the rank of Pope, not only would they have to resize all the miters to fit my unusually large and oddly-shaped head, but since I would be the tallest pope in history, they would have to heighten all of the doorways in the Vatican so that I could pass through them in the ceremonial headgear. My concern is for the construction workers of Rome and the preservation of those ancient doorways.

Lastly, I could never be Pope because of the wardrobe color-scheme which includes white, off-white, light beige, pallid tan, and more white. I value these colors and the purity which they signify, but I spill food on myself at every meal of the day. It doesn't matter what I eat, whether it be spaghetti or a banana, it will end up all over me. And of course everything will show up terribly on those robes; there wouldn't be enough Tide sticks in the world to keep up.

As I close the door on this dream, I can now focus my energies on my next goal, which is to be president of the NAACP.

### Megan Baule

Staring at the barn's half-closed doors, I sneeze. The fresh smells of straw and alfalfa mix strongly, overpowering like flood waters that sweep you away, drowning me in its thick suffocation. The wind gusts, blowing in through the cracked door, brings in the smell of frost and death. Frost, the cold smell so pure it crystallizes the lungs, leaves no room for an urge to take another breath, to stay alive. Death, so warm and cozy, if only one could stay in its embrace, holds the frozen body of the calf that lay beside me. The milking stalls still echo with the lows of the impatient spectral cattle, waiting for my grandfather to come to the rescue, a sort of savior to their overly full udders. Low, Low, Low. This is all that the milk cows do, calling for the calves taken from them. Taken to be sold, bred, or killed. The smell of feces and urine, ground down into the faded blue denim and coarse work coat bring a memory of time's cold death. The pure frost and death of memory. The hands remember the action and feeling of the early morning routine, the tug-tug that brings warm streams of creamy sustenance, but the mind forgets why the stalls were built in this barn.

Grandfather has spent so much time here; he taught me so many things here. Why is the swing in the hayloft? Why is the basketball hoop against the back-wall of the hayloft? To entertain

the children of an older generation, when there was not money for other entertainments. Why is the scythe hung up on the wall, rusty and unused? Because the farmer no longer needs to break his back harvesting with the scythe. The scythe has seen the end of its usefulness, except in the hands of the grim reaper. The farmers of my grandfather's generation begin to see their usefulness hung upon the wall as a trophy shelf of remember whens, with information that holds little relevance in today's quickly changing world. That is what I learn and hear from my grandfather as he turns back with a quiet sigh, tasting the bitterness of his lost heritage, which is only now stored in the imaginations of his grandchildren. Bitter like rusted metal, dissolving into a dust in the mouth. He looks to the dark lantern hanging from a wood beam. His morning glory eyes can still see the fuzzy woolen glow emitted by the lantern each morning in the gray-blue silence. A silence of peaceful tension. The tension of knowing today could be the last on earth under this roughly hewn wood shelter, the lantern's warm illumination softens the hardened edges, smoothes the lines on my grandfather's careworn face. This lantern burns still in my grandfather's soul, and he can hear the spectral cattle lowing. He can hear the swish, swish of the tails as the phantom cattle chew their cud, waiting in the cold, and their heavy breath rises in rolling clouds into the hazy, gray sky, heavy with snow.

The calf, frozen and dead, lies rigidly beside me in the alfalfa. Its last ragged breath taken on my lap, wheezing, panting, not lowing as it should. The calf's body temperature is so low that when a finger is put in its mouth, the finger is put in a deep freeze of ground beef. Dying. Freezing. Too late and with no way to help,

I sit as the stone foundation of the rotting wood barn leans in the harsh winter wind. The wind brings the floating death of frost upon its breath.

The uneven floor boards creak in the dusty, winter light as the ghosts of the cattle and their milk boys walk the same path. It was as though they are souls whose cursed karma kept them from the eternal light of autumn's colorful harvest through warm paths of dried corn stalks and golden grains, whispers in the tepid breeze on the way to heaven. The swing in the hayloft sways, lonely in the howling wind, as the frost sets through the barn door's cracks. The lessons learned here of swings and scythes sing hauntingly through the icy air. Frost and death, and forbidding silent nights in the matted alfalfa



## Dust I

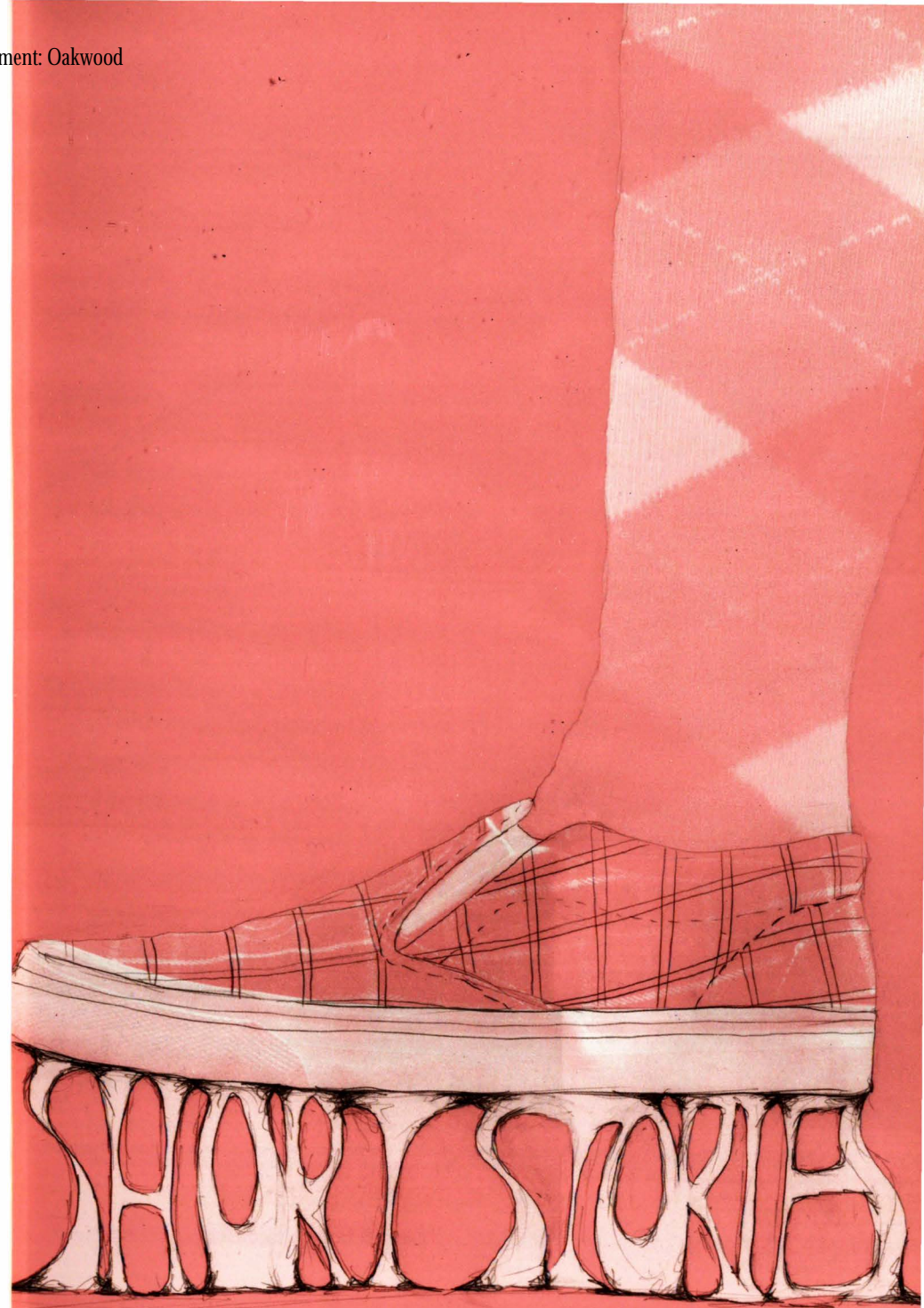
Keith Brumley

Grasshoppers gather like hungry strippers in the dark burlesque of a dust storm. The wind whistles its catcalls, a loutish drunkard whooping through the late afternoon yelling, "Take it off!! Take it all off!" Heat lightning flickers across the sky, uneven strobes of this third-rate vaudeville as thunder pounds out its jagged and empty promise of rain. Bankers mutter bloodied one-liners as bad loans sift through the windows and under the doors to nest like field mice, fouling their files of sorry luck and wasted hopes.

## Dust II

Keith Brumley

Nothing good comes from dust. It covers fence lines whole, leaving unplanned furrows three feet tall. It clogs the lungs with foreclosures and brokenness. It settles in the seams of clothes like lice. It covers the kitchen table with a patina of ill-tempered grit. Seed crops reverently planted in careful rows are ripped from the earth by wind and carried off by this brazen thief who later chucks them aside, useless. Nothing good is left. Cattle, their backs humped against the wind, climb the buried fence and drift away.





## Last Chance

Marina López Casoli

The story of my life is basically one of missed opportunities, always too scared, too self-conscious, too apprehensive to do things wrong, to get hurt, to not fulfill others' expectations. I am a LOSER, yes, with capital letters. I will never understand why I was ever given the privilege of life, a life not to be lived, a wasted life. Why on earth give life to someone like me, when there are so many others willing to live, fighting in death beds against death while I steadily fight against life? Honestly, I don't get it.

However, a couple of days ago, life seemed to piously hand me down an opportunity that I wouldn't, or couldn't, reach out for myself. I woke up to another gray late Sunday morning. It was one more of the many days I felt miserable, blue, down in the dumps, sad, nostalgic, you name it. I got out of bed and felt as if the immensity of the whole universe had been laid on my shoulders overnight or rather the very day I was born. The rest of the day promised no better prospect: correcting long due papers, catching up with endless studying, and doing the regular tedious house chores. I didn't want to face another one of those dark days.

I listlessly shuffled to the kitchen only to meet with last night's, and the one before last, and the one before last night's, pungent leftovers, dripping beer cans, sauce - stained towels, and garbage-loving flies. The picture was gruesome even for me, the sole creator of such a disgusting scene. Instead, I decided to take care of the equally disgusting pile of dirty laundry that should've been taken care of months before and that was desperately

begging for a merciful wash. I dragged my drowsy will behind me, for it was too unwilling to drag me, toward my laundry basket. I carelessly flung some warm clothes over my pajamas, picked up the basket in dejection, put my feeble will in it, and headed toward the Laundromat.

The street was painfully deserted and the unrelenting cold weather seemed to have conspired against any chances of changing my everlasting blackened mood. With great effort, I made it to the Laundromat. I walked inside, proceeded to fill the washer with my clothes and some soap, and sat down ready for the unbearable wait of the wash-rinse-wash-rinse cycle. And then it happened...

HE, a man in his late twenties or early thirties, came into the Laundromat. He was casually dressed in a blue waist-length jacket, dark-blue denim jeans, and tennis shoes. He had a clean-shaven face, corn-blond hair with a fringe that sexily slanted half-way across one of his beaming light-blue eyes and with that, he shot me the most beautiful smile I had ever seen in my whole life. I looked over my shoulder in disbelief, expecting to find behind me a striking slim blonde for the addressee of such a smile, who would run toward him and kiss his artistically-shaped smooth lips. To my surprise, there was no one around but me, so I chose to keep the smile to myself before anyone stole it from me. But, I was too shy, as always, to smile back.

Before I had any time to react, he was already strutting across the laundry room toward me. I could suddenly feel something I hadn't felt in years: life was coming back into my heart infusing a sudden gush of refreshing blood into my veins. He chose the washer next to mine and I, half paralyzed at his proximity, watched him as he struggled to figure out how to make the machine work. He looked at me, obviously looking for help. What would any girl have done in my place? Responded to that puppy look of his and offered help, no doubt. What did I do? I looked away in peevish embarrassment,

too scared of him, of myself. I hated myself for that! I hated myself for not taking chances. I hated myself for being the embodiment of apprehension. I simply hated myself.

I suddenly felt his body drop on the chair next to mine and his right arm slightly touch mine. He smelled of fresh summer herbal cologne. He sighed as if bored at the wait and through the corner of my eye; I saw he was looking at me. My heart started pounding harder than before.

"Excuse me," he said in a pleasant masculine fashion, "do you know how long the washing cycle takes?"

"Uuhmm, 30 minutes," was all I uttered in a meek stammer.

*Talk to him for Christ's sake! Say something! Don't be such an idiot!*

I thought angrily to myself. But I had forgotten I had shoved my will along with the clothes into the washer, and would, thus, not come to rescue me.

Silence. Silence. Tic-toc-tic-toc-tic-toc went the wall clock.

"Your hands," he said this time, trying to strike up a conversation, "they're blue! It's cold outside, isn't it? I hate this weather!"

*Me too, let's get out of here and know each other and go for a beer together and have fun and...!* My soul begged to be freed, to take the reins of my senses, and lead me toward expressing what I felt. However, mind and soul don't always go hand in hand unfortunately, and the mind just did what it pleased, that is, absolutely nothing.

"Yep," I said.

Silence. Silence. Tic-toc-tic-toc-tic-toc.

"Are you a pianist? Your hands look like a pianist's. Long nicely-shaped fingers," he said now.

I blushed. No one had ever noticed that about my fingers. Well, no one had ever noticed me altogether. *You have a nice pair of hands yourself. I wish I could feel them, hold them!* The war waged between mind and heart was cruel, bloody, incessant, but reason, or rather lack of it I suppose, still managed to outweigh my frail soul.

"Oh, no," I replied simply in a nervous giggle. *Say something damn it!*

"I wish my hands were a bit like yours. Mine are too rough," he added as he showed me a pair of manly David-like hands I would have died to hold.

*Rough??? What are you talking about?! They're beautiful!* My soul said in a mind-smothered scream. Silence. Silence. Tic-toc-tic-toc-tic-toc. My heart seemed to have closed its valves but blood still forced its way violently into it. The exhausted muscle just couldn't hold any more of it and I felt it painfully swell my breast.

I could feel he was looking at me again. I glanced at him, as if to confirm the feeling, and yes, there they were, his pair of sky-blue pearls looking at me straight in the eye. My face turned crimson red, my forehead and palms were wet, and my heart was about to burst out of my chest.

"Why! You aren't much of a talker, are you?" he insisted playfully. "Too bad, with that cute little face, I'm sure you must have a lovely voice too."

*Oh my God! Is this for real?! Is he really saying all these things to me?! Tell him he has a wonderful voice himself. Tell him you'd love to meet him. Tell him how he is such a sweet guy. Come on! Tell him! Tell him! You can do it! Come on!*

In a rush of luck, my will managed to make its way out of the washer and motioned me to slow but eventual action. I fearfully managed to open my mouth to utter something, to give signs of life, when suddenly he got up. His

machine had finished its short cycle. He swiftly put his clean clothes back in his basket and turned around toward me.

"I'm sure you are someone worth meeting. I would've loved to hear some more of your voice. Good-bye," he said with his bright smile. He walked out and as the door closed behind him I sat alone, again, as always, missing just another chance, again, as always.

Silence. Silence. Tic-toc-tic-toc-tic-toc. End of cycle.

## Last Chance—Revisited

Marina López Casoli

There I was again, waking up to another unsatisfactory day beside another unknown blonde. In a sluggish half-asleep motion, she slid towards me under the cold sheets in a futile attempt to cuddle up in my arms. I moved away gently so she wouldn't notice my dejection. Who was she? Who were all these women I brought into my bed night after night much too often, in a sudden burst of uncontrollable passion mingled with a much too dangerous liquorish beverage? Why did I do this?

I always woke up with a feeling of uncertainty and self-dissatisfaction. Like in a misty scene of an old black and white movie, I could hardly visualize the previous night's, apparently wildly sensual, events. Hangover was in total control of me. It banged on my head mercilessly; it drowned my mouth in a stale alcoholic breath, and kept my limbs in a state of complete numbness. I stared blankly into the ceiling still wondering. Because, you know, it's funny how all your body can lack any kind of signs of life but still your mind is relentless. It just wanders off in headlong thoughts, sometimes good, sometimes miserable like now, that tumble forcefully one into the next, whether you want it or not. And that is how I kept thinking to myself. All that these lustful nights did was to cruelly remind me of my loneliness, my inability to find someone who really cared about me beyond my looks.

Since I was a child, even too young for most my age to have any consciousness of their own bodies and looks; I was premature in my narcissist disposition. I was my mother's pride, the teacher's pet, and soon

grew out to be my buddies' sexual hero and women's hot lover. I was the kind of guy who had always relied on his cute, charming, empty-headed nature and handsome bearing to be with someone. I fearfully escaped, though hidden behind a shield of pride and disrespect, from smarter people who only challenged my poorly developed intellect. How pathetic! So, that's how all these dull pretty women ended up with me after an evening of superficial flattery. A couple of jokes, an enchanting smile, a soft breath-taking rub of a shoulder, and that was enough to get what I, and they, wanted. I couldn't stop my troubled mind. It was like a popcorn machine maker that had suddenly lost control of itself and began blurring out more and more popcorn until it choked my throat and drove me mad.

A tug of my arm and a persistent calling of my name saved me from choking to death. It was...whatever her name was, waking from her slumber and trying to catch my long ago lost attention. I looked straight at her, or rather through her, drifting in my thoughts. She said something that I didn't bother to reply. She insisted but her words again hit against my wall of silence and disinterest. My eyes, followed her frame involuntarily as she got out of bed, put on her clothes, and left.

The click of the door latch rebounded somewhere in a lost corner of my subconscious and slowly restored my senses. They regained control of me together with a sudden gush of clarity and resolution I had never experienced before. I felt an odd drive to do something about my life, to change, to find someone special, to make someone find me special, someone I really looked forward to seeing the following morning cuddled up in my arms.

I allowed my will to do what it pleased with me, and it got me out of bed, shaved my face, and dressed me up. It then motioned me toward the long forsaken laundry, as if washing my clothes would somehow mark a new beginning, a new chance. I walked out into a gray winter morning, so I forced

back on my charm-smile mask and, hopeful now, faced the day ahead. I walked into the Laundromat, expecting to cope with the dull wait of the washing cycle. And then it happened...

SHE was the most attractively plain woman I had ever seen. No make-up, no fancy hairdo, no forced sexy attitude, it was just and simply a creature of natural "womanness." She gave me a quick disinterested glance and, to my pride-stricken surprise, looked back down. What a blow to my ego! How on earth could a gal not look at me, not be dazed by my looks?! It dawned on me that this was my chance, this was the opportunity to do something about myself.

As I walked across the Laundromat, I observed her dark-haired curls that carelessly fell over her shoulders and softly caressed her marble cheeks. Her mouth was small and shut in a prudent silence. She had pianist-like fingers and unpolished nails. She was wearing a plain thick gray coat that covered her all the way down to just below her knees and showed underneath a pair of equally plain flannel pajama pants. She was so far from the women I had ever been with.

How could I approach this girl? She was obviously not the type to be trapped in charming smiles and false compliments. I felt naked in front of her, as if she were the kind of person that could actually see what was behind my appearance. I think it was the first time in my life I felt scared of making a fool of myself with a woman. What can I say? What do I do?! I chose the washing machine as the excuse to strike up a conversation:

"Excuse me," I said, "Do you know how long the washing cycle takes?" and added my smile, which after years of use and abuse had become a spontaneous reflex.

"Uuhmm, 30 minutes," was all she replied and looked away.

Gosh, how blunt! I screwed it up. She realized what an idiot I am! The washing machine cycle?! What a lame excuse! I thought to myself defeated. I looked again at her hands, the bearer of long, finely-shaped fingers, an artist no doubt.

"Your hands," I said this time, "they're blue! It's cold outside, isn't it? I hate this weather!"

"Yep," she said unisyllabically.

And here again I resorted to the dullest of topics, the weather! What was I thinking of? I was beginning to convince myself again that I had no wits whatsoever and that I was destined to being simply a cute face. Still then, I had some ego left in me that fought for survival. OK now, try a little harder and you might not make a fool of yourself this time.

"Are you a pianist? Your hands look like a pianist's. Long nicely-shaped fingers," I managed to say wondering if she would appreciate the comment or just frown at my flattering line. I saw her blush uncomfortably, obviously nervous at my awkward comment.

"Oh, no," she replied in a despondent giggle. And before I had lost all hopes, Ego summoned my mouth to move on with more barren lines:

"I wish my hands were a bit like yours. Mine are too rough," I added as I showed them to her.

Oh my God! I had never felt silence as badly as now. It cut through the air with an icy blade and I could almost feel it cutting through me too. She just sat there, immovable, quiet, completely unreceptive to my comments, or my charm, or anything. I was surely losing this battle but not Ego, oh no, he charged once more:

"Why! You are not much of a talker, are you? Too bad, with that cute little face



## The Attack

I'm sure you must have a lovely voice too." The doomed silence invaded the room yet again. Only the light of my finish cycle seemed to dare it. OK Ego, that's enough! I give up. I can't do this, I can't change who I am! And with that I stood up angry at him, at me, and swiftly put my clothes back in the basket. Let me tell you, Ego was one brave soldier. Before I left, he turned me around to face her in a last attempt to win this struggle and prove me wrong.

"I'm sure you are someone worth meeting. I would've loved to hear some more of your voice. Good-bye." This time I uttered the words not Ego. He lost, he was wrong, I was right. And with this bleak conclusion, I headed out into the cold, back home to get ready for the night's next blonde.

## Keith Brumley

Jonah Bums had not been in Buffalo Alice for more than three weeks before people started talking. He came to town in June, driving a small U-Haul with two children, a girl and a boy. John and Janine were twins, both toe heads with bright blue eyes carrying the mild complexions of Nordic descent. Jonah was the opposite. His features were dark, revealing a Mediterranean background and his hair was curled in thick coils of grey-black fuzz--Moorish influence perhaps, from the Spanish crusades.

He rented a house and took work at the grocery store as a check-out clerk. People later remarked he'd been the nicest man they'd ever met but at the time of the attack, rumors that he was a kidnapper, drug runner, and child molester enrolled in the Federal Witness Protection Program hung in the conversations of the city restaurant and gas stations with the stench of a half-assed charnel house.

People didn't move to Buffalo Alice by their own free will, except freshly graduated school teachers and seminarians—and even they were in question. Things were settled into the complacent homeostasis of caste systems inherent to northern plains ranching communities. Money—or lack thereof—indicated status. The common joke was that the only people in Buffalo Alice were those too poor, too old, or too stupid to go anywhere else—and with the beef market in a slump, the joke was no longer funny. In this respect, life in Buffalo Alice was its own reward.

Jonah, however, was a mystery. He ducked invasive questions with diffidence, leaving people wondering what had just happened. His answers were often oblique, whetting the blades of the gossip mill. But if Jonah had been direct, folks would have thought he was lying.

Except for work, Jonah mostly kept to himself. He was never at the bars—and this made him suspect to the beer-hall patrons. He paid only in cash, provoking conjecture on the part of his landlord; the children, both in their early teens, were shy—at least in public—to the point of reticence. People thought something was radically wrong with the Burns family.

I was the county's public defender. I had a vested interest in the nature of cocaine abuse, and was living out of my office. No one seemed to mind as long as I could do wills, settle estates, and stand up once a week to go through the compulsory plea bargains of drunk driving, possession of controlled substances, and domestic violence cases.

My wife had left three years before and though there was never a divorce, she was living in Sioux City, settled in with a Radio-Shack store manager. She never bothered me for money—which was good. It was going up my nose and I was planning to pull out of town come winter and not look back.

I met Jonah in July. He was walking home from work. We crossed paths as I stepped out the back door of my office. Head up, Jonah was hiking down the alley with purpose. I'd figured he'd be hunched up, eyes to the ground, and trundling through the half-dark of the mid-summer evening like a vagrant.

Instead, he stopped and introduced himself. For the first time in my life, a sense of intentionality crept through my spine until my scalp tingled with expectancy.

"I'm Carl," I said. "On most days I pass for a lawyer."

"I know," Jonah reached out for a handshake, "and I'm very pleased to meet you! This is a lovely evening, don't you agree?"

"It's good enough for July," I said and then felt embarrassed. Jonah's hands were calloused while mine were as soft as the skin on my belly. He was looking me straight in the eye. The transparency of his pleasure was genuine and I wanted to duck my head in shame and shuffle away myself. It was uncanny because in the next breath I was crushed with the exquisite feeling of meeting a lifetime friend. One of my clients, a rancher who had been in one underhanded scheme after another once told me, "people use each other until they can't stand it anymore. Then they move on to the next one." It was, I thought, a summation of human experience no less cynical, corrupt, or true than Genet's or Bukowski's. Now, I wasn't sure. I remembered an autumn night when I was a child. The Milky Way sprayed across the sky as the stars fell in a meteor shower elaborate enough for a celebration. The Northern Lights were promising a cold winter and I had been filled with the delight of just being alive "Yes," I said. "It is indeed a lovely evening."

"Yes sir," Jonah said. "Lovely. I need to be getting along. I've got kids at home." He nodded his head and left.

We began running into each other more often and it wasn't long before we started talking. Jonah came from the West Coast, somewhere around the Bay City area, and had been a junkie during the 1960's. He got straight with the Synanon organization and had risen to lead in the daily games sessions where recovering addicts confronted and tormented each other for both real and alleged flaws. It was the centerpiece of the program, originally intended to encourage rigorous self-examination. By the time Jonah left, however, it deteriorated into a sordid hoax of mutual abuse.

"Things were getting bad," he said one evening. "Charlie Deidrich, the one who started the whole thing, was getting off on a power trip. Synanon was

a big deal by then. Film makers were shooting movies about us and money was coming in like God himself had opened the doors to paradise. We were buying property and even had one place with an airstrip."

I said nothing about myself—it was a given that Jonah knew my life was zero but it didn't matter to him.

"There's a purpose in everything," he grinned, "though I sometimes wonder what it is. You ever hear that phrase 'today is the first day of the rest of your life?'"

"Sure," I said.

"Know who said it?"

"Nuh."

"It was that crazy Charlie Diedrich! You know, he had good intentions in the beginning and for awhile it worked. I haven't used since 1965—so Synanon was good for at least one thing. It saved my life."

"Yeah?"

"It saved the lives of a lot of people but when Charlie started to get that 'I had a vision' sort of crap, things went south in a hurry. First, he commanded the women shave their heads. Then, he had everyone in a long-term relationship break up and ordered them to start sleeping with other people. By the time I'd left, he was forcing the men to have vasectomies."

"Jesus!" I said.

"I know!" Jonah said. "But it really came undone when Charlie told the IRS that Synanon was a religious organization. They were investigated by the Fed's, the County, and the great state of California. I heard Deidrich made one of his warriors put a six-foot diamondback in the DA's mailbox. It bit

the poor bastard. That signaled the beginning of the end and it was only time before the journalists came. In fact, one of the stories won a Pulitzer. Synanon limped along for awhile but finally dissolved in the 1990's when the IRS seized the property. I still keep in touch with some of the old crew—but lost contact with most."

"That's life," I said. I was thinking about my winter disappearing act. I wondered if anyone except my clients—and my dealer—would realize I was gone.

"I suppose it is...But you know something? It doesn't have to be that way. Everybody gets caught up in their own bullshit and before they know it, they've stopped caring. All you gotta do is remember who you are and where you came from."

"The Baptists are short a pastor, here," I smiled. "Why don't you apply? You'd fit right in."

"I've got a past, man! Besides, Jesus hasn't done it for me."

"Surely it isn't just Jonah?"

"Nah. I was into Zen for awhile but that turned out to be just another way of keeping myself sick. Same junk as heroin but with a different name—so I guess you might say I'm enlightened." Jonah paused, smiling. "I think the Dalai Lama's a good man."

"Never met him."

Jonah laughed and we started talking about family.

"I'm the only one," I said. "My folks are dead and my wife's moved in with someone else. No kids. No brothers or sisters. My cousins have long since moved away. I'm what's left."

"Aww, man—" Jonah said. "You gotta have family! That's what keeps you grounded. If it wasn't for my kids, who knows? Hey! Why don't you stop for supper sometime? There're a couple of people I want you to meet."

"Why thanks, Jonah!"

"How 'bout tomorrow? I get off work early."

"Tomorrow's fine."

"Does 7:00 work for you?"

"It works."

"Good, good! See you then."

The next morning over breakfast, I heard the bank president tell the Sheriff that he heard Jonah was wanted by the Nevada Gaming Commission.

"George!" the Sheriff said. "I've already done a background check and that guy's got no criminal record that I can find. Sure, there're some questions. He's moved around a lot but never arrested. Not even a traffic warrant. He was married once but his wife is dead. Hit and run in downtown Santa Monica. That's the best I can come up with. Right now, he's cleaner than you George!"

Jonah hadn't told me about his wife. Now, I too was starting to wonder.

George grunted and pushed his heavy frame away from the table.

"Breakfast's on you Harold."

As George stepped out of the café, the Sheriff's russet eyes leveled on me. His arms were dark and the forehead above his deeply tanned face was white, betraying hours spent in the sun wearing a hat. "How're you doing Carl?"

"Just fine, Harold. How about yourself?"  
"Not too bad. Heard there was some cocaine around. Know anything?"

"No," I said, "And if I did, I wouldn't be able to tell you. You know better than that."

"Oh, well. Just wondering."

I got up, paid my bill and left. I needed a buzz. I also had work to do.

That night I was entertained by Jonah and his family. It started with rib steaks and baked potatoes, continuing with small talk. His children were bright and I learned they were home-schooled. The girl, Janine, was interested in the law and asked me a question about North Dakota's home schooling requirements.

"This state's pretty open," I said. "You need to be state tested and registered with your school district. That's about it."

"Cool," she said.

John gave us a little magic show and I later learned he was interested in engineering. He was building a bridge with Popsicle sticks.

"When I'm done," he said, "I'm gonna give it a stress test to see how much weight it can bear."

"I don't know too much about that," I said. "I'm just a lawyer."

John smiled and asked if I thought he could be a civil engineer some day.

"Why not?" I said. "You're more advanced in that stuff than me. Just keeping working on it and you'll be fine."

After the kids went to bed, Jonah told me his wife had been run down in California.

"I think it was one of the Synanon goons," he said, "but there was no way to prove it."

"That's too bad," I said. I wasn't looking for devils on doorknobs and though my questions from the morning had been answered, I didn't say anything more. I had enough devils on my own doorknobs and the adage of letting sleeping dogs lie seemed to fit. I went home that night with a full stomach and a sense of acceptance I hadn't felt for some time. I wasn't the one befriending the stranger. It was the other way around.

Talk about Jonah continued to filter through town for the rest of the summer like haze from a prairie fire.

"He's too nice," I heard one woman say. "He's hiding something."

"And those poor children!" Her coffee companion said. "They're wraiths! They never say anything!"

The women told each other that Margaret, the city librarian, had said the children were loitering at the library and checking out books they had no business reading.

"What child reads 'Catcher in the Rye?'" the first one said. "Margaret tried to stop them but that man told her to let them read whatever they wanted. Can you imagine?"

When I told this, Jonah didn't seem to mind.

"It'll blow over," he said. "I've been in enough small towns to know what it's like. Talk will die down when they find something else to gossip about. In the meantime, we'll just keep to ourselves. Besides, I have a friend now."

"I'm not sure I'm the kind of friend you want," I said.

"There's stuff about me..."

"If you say so."

Jonah laughed. "That's the way," he said.

Later that month somebody trashed the lawn outside his house, leaving a sign reading "I will teach you the fear of the Lord."

I suggested Jonah seriously consider moving to a bigger town.

"It's getting dangerous here," I said.

"I'm not going anywhere," Jonah said. "I'm standing my ground. Things will straighten out in a bit."

They didn't. Jonah's children started to get bullied until one day both John and Janice were beaten up. Jonah filed charges but the incidents continued to escalate. More trash showed up on the lawn and Jonah's landlord told him he had thirty days to evacuate, accusing him of fouling the both the lawn and the house.

The grocery store manager said he'd become bad for business and was going to do something about it. His children were suspended from checking out any more books from the library. Jonah asked me to file a lawsuit.

"I'm not sure it will do any good here," I said. Things were getting ugly for me too. I was losing clients and the Buffalo Alice Police Chief once stopped by my office, asking about my wife.

"You know, Carl," Tom had said, breathing heavily, "we haven't heard anything about Doris for some time. She's completely off the radar. What happened to her?" He squeezed the corpulent remains of what had once been an athlete into one of my chairs.

"She's in Sioux City," I said.

"That's not what I heard," he said. "She just—disappeared."

"I've got her phone number Tom," I said.

"No need, Carl. I was just wondering." The Chief grunted as he hoisted himself out of my chair. "Now don't be a stranger—Okay?"

"Right," I said.

Jonah died in September. The grocery store manager had put him to work unloading a truck full of produce when he started to have chest pains. Instead of letting him rest, the manager told him to get moving or quit. Jonah went ahead and continued to work. Then he collapsed. He was dead before the ambulance arrived. The coroner's report read "massive coronary caused by smoking." I'd never seen him smoke. His children were sent to foster homes. By November, I was binging on cocaine like a dog rolling in cowshit. It was killing me and I checked myself into a rehab center on the other side of the state.

When I was released, I discovered the lease to my office in Buffalo Alice had been terminated. I was clean by then and still had enough money to move. I ended up in South Dakota where I rented a subsidized apartment in Pierre. From there, I started filing lawsuits on Jonah's behalf, the first being wrongful death. I still had some contacts from law school and started calling around. I also made new ones at the NA meetings I attended. I got the name of a judge who understood the dynamics of abuse and contacted him about Janine and John. He called in a favor and had a good social worker assigned to watch over them both.

That's how it stands right now. Except for Jonah, my law practice is gone. I'm checking groceries at the Safeway in Pierre. I've re-established contact

with my cousins and started to attend church. Like Jonah, I don't know if Jesus is doing it for me. For now, however, it's all I have and when things start to get a bit too much, I can hear Jonah laugh.

"That's the way," he tells me. "That's the way."

## Jenny's Trees

Lori Jacobsen

I jump and pluck a maple leaf. It is such a fine green with crisp edges. For no special reason, I brush it across my lips. I rub it on my cheek and across my forehead. It feels so soft.

I don't have any food and no shelter for the night. Still, I feel safe and okay. No one could hurt me here. Except for the bees. The bees could cut my breath in half the first seven minutes and take it away in the next seven. Oh, and the three leaves. They certainly wouldn't kill me, but they could give me powerful misery. Mama always tells me, "Jenny, count the leaves."

I've spent most of my life here amongst the trees. Ten years may not be old to many, but it is a lifetime for me. It's so peaceful here—no yelling allowed, not in my trees. If you have something to say, you say it nice or I'll kick you out.

Daddy went back to work in the mines yesterday. Mama always gets a nasty temper the day after he leaves. I cry because I think the hole will fall in and take his breath away forever. Mama always says Daddy won't actually die in the mines, but the mines will surely kill him. I can't understand that, but I imagine once he is dead, it won't matter how. I'll still miss him terribly and cry more than I ever have.

Joseph couldn't come to the trees with me today. Mama caught him wagging his naked butt at Thomas Penn's sister this morning. Me, I'm glad he did it. She is snotty and I hate her guts. Anyway, he has to spend the afternoon

scraping chicken poop off the hen house floor. I asked him if he was okay and he said, "My ass is sore, Jenny. Now go away and leave me alone."

I'm probably the fastest tree-climber you'll ever see, but I don't care anything about that. I just like the trees. I like how they whisper my name when I sit on their branches. I like how they wave to each other just like the people downtown. I like how they cradle me in their branches, gently rocking, gently swaying. I like the way they smell, fresh and clean and sharp with life.

I'm 86 years old now. I haven't climbed a tree since May 14, 1974. I was 57 years old and according to my late husband, a damned fool. I hadn't felt that alive in years. Why I was still smiling when they sent me home from the emergency ward with my arm in a sling.

I hadn't felt that way in many years, too many, and I haven't had that feeling since. What I do feel now is old, tired and mostly dead. Oh my heart is still beating like a trooper, and except for my bum arm, my body is mostly doing what it should. But all that doesn't matter much when your soul wants to just lie down and rest.

Joseph grew three-and-a-half inches this summer. Mama keeps threatening to cut his legs off at the knees to keep him from growing out of all his pants. He's always clearing his throat too, like he has a bad cold. And moody! Why he's yelling about the silliest things! I hate Susie Penn, and I thought he did too. Or at least that's the way it seemed last summer. Then the other day I happened to mention how ugly she was and he got all crazy on me! I don't understand him. He doesn't even want to come to the trees with me any more! That's just as well, maybe. I like to be alone in the trees. Sometimes I think that only I can understand what they are whispering to each other.

Joseph did a tremendous amount of growing that year...physically and emotionally. He grew right of his need to spend much time with me anymore.



Now I can look back and marvel at how proud I really was that he grew into such a fine man, but not then. Back then I was too busy nursing my sick heart because I thought it was me that was a'driving him away. I did hate Susie Penn too, although it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with me. From the way I saw it, she was stealing my best friend. And he was going willingly. So maybe "hate" really is the wrong word. Jealousy is a better fit. Course as an old woman, it is easy for me to see the past clearly. And Susie did make a very fine sister-in-law, not to mention my dearest friend.

Daddy is back home again for a few weeks. Mama is just putting on a terrible fuss. She had all the neighbors come over and we roasted our fattest pig. Mr. Jenkins brought his banjo and the folks danced and danced. Joseph spent most of his time over on the porch swing with Susie, who I still hate, by the way. As for me, well, I got to know a few new kids—ones that I will be going to high school with at the fancy new public school building in town. I never really thought about it before, but sometimes I think that I would like to spend more time with Tommy Price. I can't really say why, except when I see him, I feel kind of sick inside, but it's a good kind of sick, I think.

Oh Tommy made me feel something inside, that's for sure. When I think back to that first time I took him to my trees, I forget just how old this blood is pumping through my veins. And our first kiss, well, how can I describe it? It was as if the world stopped turning and nothing existed but him and me. I loved him from that moment and forever. He is gone now, I always had a feeling he would die before me, but that didn't help a bit with all the pains stabbing their way through my heart. It has been seven years now, and I am used to being alone. But I am not used to being lonely.

Mama made me a new dress for my graduation day. It was baby-blue cotton with a small white flower pattern all over. It had a fitted waist and hung just

below my knees. Which was good, since I had been climbing the day before and got them all scratched up. Mama just can't understand what a grown girl would be doing up in those trees. And I just can't explain to her that they are just as important to me as my family.

How can you explain something like that? How do you explain that the trees call to you at night, sending their whispers to you through the soft, summer breeze? It was too difficult to tell my mother that the reason why I was so attached to those trees is because they were the only constant thing in my life.

My father was always gone to work in the mines. When he was home, his time was filled with taking care of the house, barn and chicken coop. There was always something that needed to be repaired.

Very little of his time and attention went to Joseph and me. When we did get some time with him, he was always so tired. Tired of the dusty mines, tired of the constant repairs and tired of the nagging cough that he began to develop over the years. Although she was always there, Mama's moods were changing constantly between, worry for Daddy, bitterness that he had to work in the mines and frustration with Joseph and me.

Mama and Daddy's bedroom was on the second floor. It looked right out over the whole backyard. Tommy, Mama and me pushed his bed right up to the window and propped him up on a bunch of feather pillows.

It broke my heart that he couldn't walk me down the aisle, but it made me feel good knowing that he was up there, watching everything. Just before we said our "I do's," I looked up at Daddy and he gave us a wave. That was the last time I saw him smile.

Despite Daddy's sickness, it was a beautiful day. Tom looked so fine in his blue suit. I could hardly believe it was all happening!

I couldn't talk my mother into letting me have the ceremony in the trees, but we did compromise a bit. Mr. Jenkins built a lovely wooden archway and we wove daisies through the latticework. A soft breeze blew through the garden keeping everyone nice and cool.

Daddy left us the next week. And even though I knew it was coming, it was harder than ever for us...but not for Daddy. I couldn't believe how calmly and peacefully he just went to sleep. Until you are faced head-on with your own mortality, you will never be able to understand how that happens.

So here I am, contemplating all those things. The doctors told me the cancer was eating me up inside, and they are right, but these last few years have left me with very little inside anyway.

They wanted to treat it, or rather prolong it. As Doctor Paulson said, "It won't be a cure, but we can buy you some time." I told him I have been getting my time for free for the past 86 years and I don't intend on spending one dime on "time." Course he argued with me about having time to get my affairs in order and having time to say goodbye to my family and friends. I can see where that would be a damn nice thing to have, but unfortunately, I've already been saying goodbye to them. Most of my family and friends have beaten me to the grave.

So here I am, nestled in my beautiful, precious grove with a blanket of leaves underneath me. I've barely the strength to finish this journal entry. But I'm feeling that peaceful calm that Daddy so bravely displayed. And best of all, I am not alone. I am here with them all. This isn't just a wonderful assortment of pines, maples, oaks and elms. This is my family. The rustling leaves are carrying the whispers of all who I have loved and lost. They are here and I can see them now, telling me to come home.

## Billy Boyd

"There's an alien in the middle of the road there, aye," John said perplexed as he dismounted the snowplow. John worked several jobs for the city from driving a dump truck to a snowplow. This evening, as he looked out the cab and down the rusty orange hood at the dingy snow lit like soiled stars, he saw something most interesting. To most, the sight would be far less interesting and far more disturbing. John W. Shaw did not move to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to be disturbed. His face bore more aggravation; if anything, that something slowed him down from his graveyard shift. The road wasn't going to plow itself.

"What's next...another moose?" he thought. He neared what appeared to be a man's shape. Disheveled snow covered most of the sight, and what a sight it was to behold.

"Damn" was all he could muster from his muffled lips when he took a shovel to begin uncovering the body. "Damn it all" was all he could say as he uncovered more of the body. He grunted slurred slang throughout the work. He thought of what else he could be doing besides shoveling. He wanted to look at his watch but layers of warm clothing separated him from his time machine. Without it, he felt frozen, chronically frozen on the graveyard shift.

The next scoop of snow flung over his shoulder scared more than the living shit out of the man. It scared something deep, faith and education possibly. No, it scared the man beyond death and taxes. This was not an absolute truth so clearly marked in the sand, or snow for that matter.

John's instinct was to radio in any severe case that he may have come across on the road. The CB choker dangled from the rearview mirror. John only took a few steps before his dulled, midnight mind began the gear-turning tumbling over what he must do now. Disbelief settled in his cheek where a bit of snuff sat; disbelief, good as snuff but not quite as dusty. He grimaced, bit tried to decipher...it.

"This isn't no traffic scene. Hell no," he thought..

He began to sweat standing here in the middle of the barren, desolate, snow-drifting highway. He wore a good pair of coveralls, thick fur-lined snow boots, a yellow parka crusted with snow flakes in the creases, goggles, and gloves. The plow heater was running and the door hung wide, flakes melting to the seat where he could have been. Only if he'd kept driving, bind as a bat. Plowed the damn thing into the ditch.

It began to sink into him. Whatever lack of ignorant loneliness humanity felt when coming into first contact with an alien chilled him to the bone. Immediately, he looked skyward, star-ward, toward the drifting void: black, open, and vapid, a black hole that reached out and touched the horizons. The sky never seemed so big nor did it ever scare him. Never had he felt so claustrophobic being outside. He threw his baklava to the asphalt to get a little breathing room and rapidly exhaled billowy puffs of breath. Now it was a foreboding, forbearing force that dropped a mysterious frosted gift upon the earth. Upon the Earth.

The engine hummed over the wind lifting his hood to the back of his neck then back down again. The blistering cold wind hurt, his cheeks burned, and a headache was settling in for the night. He felt sour; a small lump began to swell in the back of his throat. He hated feeling dizzy. A slip could leave two ugly babies on the road.

Almost hyperventilating, he swallowed and looked back at the humanlike form on the road. "Am I really losing it or is that an alien, a mutant, or one ugly baby?" he asked himself. He actually did not know what to think but to stare long and hard, long and empty, long and distant for several minutes.

The CB squelched.

Slowly, it dawned on John Shaw—twenty-three years old, living from paycheck to paycheck, owning a bare apartment, and bored of girlfriend who wore way too much makeup, bleached her roots dead, and thought Tom Selleck was a god—that he did not need this crap atop the rest of his meaningless life. He took one long look at the mutant alien baby thing.

"Fuck it."

One short look was all he gave it after he mounted back into the snowplow, lowered the boom, threw it down into first, and pushed it to the ditch like the rest of the snirt. The CB crackled and the squelch broke to a call.

"Big Dipper, this is Foxy Lady," said the dispatcher.

He waited for a moment to answer.

"Yeah, this is Big Dipper."

"You see anything odd out there tonight?"

Again, he stared out into the night, not to dare stare beyond the high beams abyssal reaches.

"Nah, not a thing but a bit of roadkill, Foxy Lady."

"Sure? An idiot film crew said they lost their movie prop on your strip this morning. Looks like an alien," she continued. "Said it's worth big greenbacks if they get it back."

## An Old Tome

He broke into a nervous smirking. "Foxy Lady" he replied with sighed relief.  
 "That's a ten-four. I think I saw something a mile south of mile marker 34. Big  
 Dipper, out."

"Damn. It didn't even look like an alien. Idiot Hollywood," John thought.

## Matthew Jacobsen

Ms. Dode arrived at the library an hour early like she did every morning to open up and get everything ready before the other librarians arrived. It was a dark October day, chilly and eerily quiet. Ms. Dode checked the outside book-drop box as she always did before entering the library. She unlocked the box and with a slow forbidding creak opened it. She pulled out the usual books, tapes, and videos, but then something else caught her eye. A white envelop at the bottom of the bin. She reached a skinny, wrinkled hand down and picked it up. Written on the outside was simply "Scary Story Contest." The library was holding a scary story contest where people in the community were encouraged to write in to see who had the scariest story. With a smile on her face she opened the envelop, and pulled out the contents. All that was inside was a single sheet of paper inscribed with, "Boo. You're dead." A cold wind swept across the vacant parking lot and leaves circled around Ms. Dode's legs. A shiver ran through her body, but she figured it was the wind that chilled her. Regarding the message as a simple prank by one of the local teenagers, she put the sheet back into the envelop and continued on with her morning duties.

It was during the middle of re-shelving books when Ms. Dode felt rather ill. She rarely got sick and thought it very strange that she felt this way. She went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face. When she looked up at herself in the mirror, a creature stood in front of her that she at first did not recognize. The wrinkles and eyes and hair were all familiar but not what was suppose to be there. Ms. Dode's skin was paler than this morning and maybe

even a little discolored. Her eyes seemed sunken in. She thought she was just tired. After all, it was still pretty early.

She went about the rest of the morning doing her librarian chores when she began to itch. It was only slightly at first, a mere nuisance. But soon the scratching consumed all her attention. After a particularly violent fit, she felt something come off her arm and land on the ground with a wet splat. Ms. Dode, alarmed, looked down at her arms. The skin was dry, cracking, and yellowish. Her eyes flew to her fingertips. They were back and green, and without realizing it, she had broken a nail; completely off! Blood trickled down her wrinkled hand, dripping onto the floor before her and pooling around a hunk of her own flesh, which had splatted to the floor moments ago. Ms. Dode screamed in panic and ran to the back room.

It was seven in the morning, still dark, still cold, still windy, dark clouds rolled over the sky and there was a hint of lightning in the air but no thunder yet. Ms. Offer was arriving for work, obviously the first she thought, besides Ms. Dode of course. She pulled her jacket tight as she walked up to the library. It loomed above her, dark and gothic. It had been an old stone church before being converted into a library, but it still gave her the chills to look upon it. As she passed through the large double doors she found the library dark and in disorder. Most of the lights were off which was unusual. Ms. Dode was nowhere to be found. Slowly, Ms. Offer walked among books, thrown from the shelves. Pages ripped out and scattered around the place with what looked like bloody finger and hand prints all over them. Even an entire shelf had been knocked to the ground. In the dark it was hard to see more than a few feet in front of her. There was also a strong smell in the air. Something like rotting flesh. It was so strong, and seemed to come from the backroom. Slowly Ms. Offer crept toward the backroom. As she drew closer she could see something strange inside. It was a human shadow of someone just standing. Rhythmically swaying slightly back and forth; just sort of shifting

weight from one foot to the other. Standing just outside the entry. Ms. Offer questioned, "Ms. Dode?" The shadow started to move at the echo of her voice. She heard a sound like dry leaves rubbing against each other; it was like someone was not quite picking their feet up. The smell grew stronger. So strong Ms. Offer put a hand to her mouth to prevent from vomiting. What came through the door was a creature who's yellow-green, rotting skin was hanging off its face and limbs; chunks of flesh dropping to the floor as it moved. Its hair long, white, straggly, and falling out. The creature's eyes, glazed over and opaque, grew wide with excitement when it saw Ms. Offer. With a hurried pace and arms outstretched it let out an airy gasp. As saliva dripped from the teeth, Ms. Offer tried to scream, but the creature, that bore Ms. Dode's clothing, clamped its jaws onto Ms. Offer's face, knocking both and a garbage can onto the floor. The contents of the garbage can spilled out; a white envelope and a single sheet of paper with the words, "Boo. You're dead" scrawled across it.

# Home

Donald Young

The tell tale dripping of water seemed like a giant clock ticking. It echoed in the cell with an overwhelmingly quiet, "Drip...drip...drip...drip...drip...", the only other sounds permeating the air were the prisoners steady breath and the beating of his heart. His heart beat in time with the constant dripping. "boo-booph...boo-booph...boo-booph...boo-booph...boo-booph..."

The walls had tick marks all over. Each mark represented a day and each day represented his sanity. Looking at an unmarked section of the wall the prisoner picked up a stone and made a new mark. How long had he been here? His clear blue eyes squinted in the darkness as he counted. There were exactly 4015 marks. Eleven years of hell, has it been so long? He could not remember.

It was an eternity. It was an eternity in the stillness and quiet of his mind. Old thoughts revisited time and time again. They seemed to keep pace with the constant dripping. The darkness had no meaning of time to it. The darkness never changed. It was a constant and had no end and no beginning it was just there. The darkness was there to remind him of everything and nothing. The darkness was palpable wearying; it had the weight of eternity to it. Yet the drip, drip, dripping, told him that time past.

It only seemed like moments. He remembered clearly the day he was brought here. He remembered the guards telling him his new home was Crucible. The oldest prison in the country, it was a political asylum of sorts.

The prison held prisoners that knew too much, or too little depending on the disposition of the court magistrate. In the case of this prisoner he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. That was what he had been told. He just could not remember when nor where. Shortly after he proposed to Daphnie, militia men seized him in the middle of the street, and put him in an armored wagon then took him straight to Crucible.

From the look of the place it was a large stone house in the middle of nowhere. From the outside there was nothing that indicated it was a prison only someplace strange. There were no roads coming to or from the house, there was cottonwoods and tall grass surrounding the house giving it a feeling of abandonment except for a tendril of smoke escaping through the brick chimney. The closest road lay miles away. The inside was a different matter completely. It had a ground level that looked like a large home. It was immaculate: fancy furnishings, frilled curtains, plush leather couches and chairs, portraits of old fashioned men and women with a pleasant look to their face. The door to the basement at the rear of the house was planted into the hard ground like it had always been there. Made of cottonwood it had a crucifix nailed into it. When the door opened, damp old air gave promise of what's to come. A narrow stairway led down to a warren of cells. It was silent and still. The guards stopped at an open door about midway down a long torch lit hall. The warden ushered the prisoner in saying with an agreeable manner, "Welcome to Crucible."

That was eleven years ago to the day. A grandiose thought of freedom happened to enter the prisoners mind. It was not the first time he had such thoughts. His square jaw tightened as he ran his unwashed hand through his shoulder length, filthy platinum hair imagining what he would do if he were free. A smile crept to his chapped lips. He would find Daphnie and tell her how much he missed her. Stroking his scraggly, unkempt beard he thought of the grand party his family and friends would throw for him. His mother

beaming and his father proud would toast to his grateful return. His sister would introduce him to his niece and nephew with a smile on her face. His friends would be there with a tankard of ale for him. Daphnie wearing a sun dress would hold his hand. He smiled.

His nostrils flared at the end of his short nose. His boney face hardened as he lost those thoughts. Today was his eleventh anniversary of being here. Which meant the warden would come and beat him. Just as he was about to lose all hope a plan began to take shape. What if he asked for more? What if the warden killed him? It would be better than living one more moment in this hell. He took off his ragged tunic thinking I cannot continue living like this; things are going to change one way or another. Facing the wall he fettered himself into the rusty manacles then just stood there preparing his mind for the eventual beating. He wished all that he had known a pleasant farewell regretting only that he could not see them again, perhaps it is better this way. He didn't have to wait long. The tramping of heavy boots announced their approach. He heard the key enter the lock and the rusty tumblers whine a bit just before the eventual metallic click. The door made a loud screech as it opened. Torch light flooded the cell burning his eyes.

"Well, well, I see you've been expecting us," the warden's gravelly voice rasped.

The prisoner stood silent. One of the guards pulled the chain raising the prisoner's desiccated arms above his head.

The warden moved in close his fetid breath whispered in the prisoner's ear.

"This is going to hurt," he whispered wickedly.

The warden stepped back and uncoiled his whip. Feet spread shoulder width apart, body facing the adjacent wall, the warden's free hand raised just before he swung the whip around with all the force he had in his small frame.

The tail end struck the prisoner with a deafening crack. The calloused skin

on his back burst apart from the blow. He nearly bit his tongue in half from the excruciating pain. It sent shock waves throughout his body ending at his head and feet. It felt like he was going to explode. Then another blow came, and then another, then another; the warden rained blows down upon him with frenzied abandon. The prisoner fought to remain conscious. Gritting his teeth he thought: I can't give the warden the satisfaction, it's only pain, pain tells you that you are still alive.

All at once the warden stopped. Gasping for air, hands on knees the warden was getting tired.

"Are you done?" the prisoner tried to ask in a steady voice, it quivered just a little.

The warden's purple lips tightened. His beady orbs nearly closed from the furrowing of his brow. His nostrils flared at the end of his long pointed nose. Long black hair was plastered to his thin skull. With a scream, his thin arms flailing wildly, the warden unleashed his fury on the prisoner. He landed blow after blow upon the shoulders and head of the prisoner. The prisoner laughed between each blow. Remembering the very moment he proposed to Daphnie, she giggled and screamed with delight, which infuriated the warden even more and more. Her soft arms encircling him and holding him close, until finally clutching at his chest the warden wheezed out a command to the guards, "Get Athena," he then dropped to the blood drenched floor, she said I will.

Gurgling blood the prisoner laughed and laughed. His mind had a picture of the warden clutching at his chest while holding onto a bloody whip, and Daphnie telling him that she will. The warden had a heart attack from beating him, at the same time Daphnie accepted his proposal. How fitting.

He heard one of the guards rushing away screaming, "Athena! Warden Black has fallen!"

How he longed to hear those words. "Thank God," he rasped with a smile.

Athena came brisk through the door. Her age worn face had lines at the corners of her penciled lips and alien, sky blue eyes. She had silver hair wrapped in a tight bun at the base of her swan-like neck. Two wisps of silver hair came down the sides of her thin, diamond shaped head to end just below her gently pointed chin. She wore an unstained white robe that was almost gossamer in the dark cell. Befitting her name she looked like she would be as comfortable carrying a spear as she would a book.

Her eyes were hard, and her mouth frowned as she leaned over the warden to check his pulse.

"Get him to the infirmary now!" she said in a voice that spoke no non-sense. The guards jumped to her command.

Pointing at one of the three guards she said, "Let the prisoner down," the guard unfettered him.

"Bring me some water and some clean rags," Athena demanded of the guard. The guard left leaving the two of them alone.

"What is your name?" She gently asked.

"Jack." The prisoner managed to gasp. How long had it been since he heard his own name? He didn't quite forget it but it had no use any longer. It sounded good.

"Here take and chew this. It will help with the pain." She gently said. Her long delicate fingers held a dark green serrated leaf.

"No, I don't need it," he didn't want to give in to the warden even if the warden was not there.

She knew how these men lived. Theirs was a world of constant paranoia and

fear. One prisoner had told her that pain was an old friend that sometimes he wished for its company. So she did not argue the point. They had so little, far be it from her to not allow them their pain.

"Athena!" one of the guards yelled. "Come quick. I think the warden is dead," the guard announced breathless.

"Then take me to him," she commanded. Getting up and walking to the door she put her hand on it then looked back at Jack. She looked at the markings on the wall, pausing but a moment, pulling her hand from the door she left. Athena had chosen her champion.

All at once Jack was alone and the cell door was wide open. Jack tried to get up but fell. He began crawling, his fingernails breaking on the rough floor. He was weak and could hardly move. For the first time in eleven years he cried. So close, yet so impossibly far. He thought of his friends and family, longing to see them again. He thought of Daphnie. He wondered what she was doing now. He wondered if she ever thought of him. A vision of her arose in his mind.

Looking like a flower in full bloom. Her straw colored hair was arrayed in a profusion of curls. Her dimples flashed below her round freckle sprinkled cheeks as she gave him his special smile. Green eyes sparkled, her button-nose flared just a little when her full lips said, "I love you."

It was almost too much for Jack to bear. With a bellow of anger he staggered to his feet. "Daphnie," Jack whispered. The pain he felt made every movement torture muscles wouldn't move like they should, with a supreme effort of will his legs took a step. A little shaky at first he stumbled along reaching the door. He looked to the left and right. He saw a stair to the left which he knew led to the basement door. Hand to the wall he staggered toward the stairwell. The strength in his limbs was returning the closer he got.



## Through the Gap

He mounted the stairs taking them two at a time. He stumbled frantically up two flights before coming to the door. It was closed. He pushed and to his surprise it was not locked. The door swung easily open.

He saw the sun, and color so brilliant that it brought tears to his eyes. He burst through the door as fast as his legs could carry him. He saw beautiful giant cottonwoods their silvery leaves glinting in the sun. Little puffs of white cotton floated in the air while the tall grass undulated from the soft breeze. It smelled of green grass and fragrant wild flowers. Jack took a deep breath marveling at the beauty of it. Looking up he saw puffy white clouds which rested in an azure sky. Triumphant Jack, adrenaline pumping, ran and shouted and laughed and screamed all at once. Flailing his arms he cried, "I am free!"

The guard's grey eyes were staring down the barrel of his musket. Hesitating but a moment, he fired. Metal scraped on metal as the spark ignited the powder. There was a thunderous boom as the ball was forced out. It made a whizzing sound just before it struck Jack in the temple. With a smile on his face Jack fell dead.

A hundred years later the old house was found. In the basement they found the horror that was Crucible. Old broken bones lie on the dirt floor in every cell but one. In that one cell there was a poem, etched with the utmost care, upon the wall and it read thus:

Home

In my minds eye,

White clouds rest in an azure sky

Rays from a distant sun

Cast shadows across emerald meadows

Where I run.

### Kelly Henkel

Prudence Grey, assistant librarian, stared through the gap between the jagged tops of books and the smooth underside of the shelf above. Her blue eyes peered deeply at a torso of which she could see five inches-- a blue and white striped polo with four buttons and one unbuttoned breast pocket. Crouched down, she steadied herself by resting her knees on the second shelf up. Her hand absent mindedly flicked around a dust cloth on the third shelf. She had been in this position for approximately four minutes; her knees ached with the pressure as the corner of the shelf dug in. Her beige wool tights gave no padding to her poor joints. Eavesdropping related injuries are a real job hazard for librarians.

The man shifted and crouched to look at call numbers, double checking the scribbled note in his hand, written on scratch paper made from an old library reading group calendar. May 16: Withering Heights. Prudence averted her eyes, suddenly very interested in the flecks of dust on the cream colored metal shelves. She could hear the faint chants of naked nomads inside the olive green and cracked bound National Geographic magazines in front of her. They chattered in Rwandan, or maybe it was Kenyan. Their voices stirred up the layer of dust, the skin flecks of endless patrons, on the top of the pages. This is how books take back from people who take everything from them. The books absorb you, too.

She heard a little African Click Language in between the chiming bells strapped to their dancing feet and the pounding of their five foot high canes, covered in brightly colored feathers and shells.

"Ta Ta ca-cho Tick Ah!" they said, forcefully, which is loosely translated to "Talk to him! Say something! Get going, girl!"

Prudence could say any number of things to Four Buttons. She could say, for instance, "I know where that is. You need not search any longer. PR502.321-- the spot burns in my mind. My fingers tripping over the spines of books are like a divining rod that will lead you to what you need. I can show you it all, all of this is mine."

She couldn't even squeak out a "Can I help you find something?" when it came down to it, but these elaborate fantasies filled the day. When he brought up the book for checkout she would fake busy with a stack of audio books. She would shuffle around a few CDs and pile up picture books. After he glanced around nervously, Karen, the head librarian, would be forced to put down her True Romance and waddle to the computer, her chubby fingers outstretched for his library card.

He suddenly bent over eye level with the shelf that Prudence was peering through.

"Retreat! Retreat!" the nomad warriors shouted. They were always like that. Giving her courage one minute then hightailing it the next. Their restless spirits connected, she understood these rootless people. She herself shifted between towns and libraries like a Dewy Decimal drifter. Sometimes, though, she felt they ought to be a little more steadfast. At least for her sake they could try.

"Prue. Prue? I'm going on break. Can you watch the counter?"

"Oh yeah, Karen. Yeah. Sorry."

"What? Ok." Karen looked suspiciously at Prudence and walked past her. People who do very little work always give dirty looks to people they think

are doing less. Maybe they are worried that someone else has discovered a better tactic for slacking. Karen walked down past historical fiction, bumping her big hips against an Elizabethan drama, creating an indent in the formerly perfectly aligned spines.

Prudence gave two tugs to her cranberry colored cardigan and walked over to the counter. She slunk down into the swivel chair and surveyed her domain. First she glanced back to Four Buttons, this time able to examine his whole back side, the front being obscured by the shelf. He had on khaki Dockers and brown loafers. Just the sort of outfit she would expect from Four Buttons.

The library that she sat in front of was an old Carnegie that might have been beautiful but was now mangled through years of necessary and practical additions. That's the true soul of a library, Prudence thought. It would gladly sacrifice its beauty to accommodate more readers; to fill its belly with new volumes until it needed to unbuckle its belt and add a new wing or another story.

She would make an outdoor library in some alternate world where the sun wouldn't fade the text and the rain wouldn't trickle down the margins. On either side would be endless fields, waiting for possible expansion. She could hire an old beatnik on a riding lawnmower to weave between the shelves and keep the grass as even as she kept the spines along the edge of the shelf. He could spout modern poetry to patrons when he had to pause to let them pass:

"Fishsticks! Fishsticks! Wholetthatpenguinout? Over the river and through the woods!"

A man came up to the counter and handed her his card. Prudence made a mental note of his name as she glanced at the card: Greg Longfellow. He

looked like a cross between Jerry Garcia and Santa and would be perfect for the landscaping position.

"Nice weather."

"Yes, It's nice out." Prudence said.

"Too bad you are stuck in here!" Chortled Jerry Claus.

Prudence immediately crossed him off her list and threw away his application... she would never understand why people chose to say the obvious in an effort to create small talk instead of just keeping silent.

"Your books are due January 11." Prudence said, in a tone which let him know that she was very disappointed in him.

As he walked away Prudence's attention drifted back towards Four Buttons, who was shifting back and forth on his feet then bending down to look at the shelf three from the ground. What sort of name would be appropriate? Jake or Brian. No, it had to be Jake. He should also be a single parent with two daughters who was an expert in French braiding and the stock exchange. Prudence decided to kill his ex-wife off slowly. Something lingering would perhaps positively effect his character.

Four buttons stepped back into full view. He picked up an book and leafed to the index. He traced his finger down the column and turned the page, pausing for a second near the bottom of the page. Prudence could see his lips mumbling the page numbers, repeating them so he wouldn't forget. His eyes looked up in attempt to hoist the information to the top of his memory, where it would balance precariously until he recalled it.

Four buttons held the three inch thick hardcover book with the spine balanced in his palm. The four fingers of his left hand rested on the front cover while his thumb was placed on the edge of the pages. They began to

fall past his thumb as he searched from the back to the front for the page he needed, his brow furrowed with concentration. Prudence couldn't see the cover of the book but she noted that he was in History.

He must be writing a book about Napoleon. A psychological epic, delving into the true thoughts of the Corsican Brigand. He had dreams of being at Waterloo at the general's side, running along side of le petit caporal with pen and notepad in hand. Prudence could follow behind with a canvas bag slung across her shoulders full of spare pencils and quills, deftly hurdling the fallen and bloody soldiers, careful not to get her breeches and tights dirty. A battle field can be a dangerous place for writing implements and a writer must always be prepared. She quite fancied wearing a three pointed hat with a tri-colored revolutionary cockade upon her head.

Four Buttons would chronicle every minute turn of his jellybean shaped head, every wag of his Vienna sausage fingers. He would write, for posterity, that Napoleon tucked his hand in his jacket in portraits so that he could look like a Roman general, hand enfolded regally with yards of uncorrupted white toga. But, really, Napoleon just had little sausage fingers and he knew it.

Prudence's eyes wandered over to the CD rack where two boys were busily pocketing the disks while a third boy was on lookout. Close by, in the Young Adult section, a little girl, about 12, was greedily reading a V.C. Andrews book full of intrigue and incest. She would glance up and around, her own look out. She must be wondering if the prudish parents and listless librarians knew what was contained within the metallic shiny cover. Indubitably not, she would decide, or it wouldn't be housed in the YA section.

Over in the computer banks a middle aged woman was searching eBay, maybe fueling her addiction for Precious Moments figurines or antique dishes, out of a tight fisted husband's watch. Two teenagers groped each other cautiously in the biography aisle. In a library, everyone can get their

kicks as long as they remember to keep quiet, as per library rules. A house of knowledge is also a den of sin, and Madame Prudence approved.

As she was imaging the sort of debauchery that her patrons were getting into, Karen walked up to the counter, refreshed from her coffee and People Magazine break.

"Did you see what that Paris Hilton has been up to?"

"No, I haven't heard" Prudence replied, "What?"

"Well, she's fighting with Nichole again and now the producers of the show aren't sure if they can do another season. I don't know why those two can't just get along. Really, they are as bad as Lindsey and Hillary. When those young girls get a little bit of fame they just get out of control. If they were my daughters I would just tell them to get along with each other. Especially when it is over a boy. You know what my mom always says: 'a boyfriend is for now but a girlfriend is forever.' Although, mind you, that Aaron Carter is a little cutie."

"Mmm. Yeah, that is too bad, Karen."

"You wouldn't understand, Prue, but sometimes the competition over a boy can get vicious. Girls like you don't often have..."

Four Buttons appeared in front of them, interrupting Karen mid-thoughtless-insult. Prudence's heart jumped in anticipation. The proverbial moment-of-truth was neigh.

"Hi," he said as he slammed the book down on the counter. The Rise and Fall of Napoleon. He reached in his back pocket and pulled out a light brown leather wallet, which flopped open to reveal a Wal-Mart portrait of two little girls with shoulder length hair and straight across bangs. He produced the brown and white library and slid it to Karen across the sun bleached and

yellowed Formica counter. He had excellent hands up close. Prudence glanced at the card. Walter Midborn. She immediately started to stack the audio books, resolute in her decision that a girl with plans such as hers could not settle for a man with the wrong name, especially one who probably didn't even know it himself.

## Switching Flights

Sara Deutscher

"I'm sorry M'am but I have done everything I can for you. I have been instructed to give you this offer."

"Yeah? My God what a great robot you are!"

"Excuse me?"

"Forget it, and don't ever expect my business again!"

So this is what the past three years has all boiled down to; yelling at a complete stranger on the phone. She only feels a little bad about it, because how could people be so unfeeling? For the past three years she's been waiting for this Monday morning flight. For the past three years she has been waiting to peel that yellow ribbon sticker from the East window pane-the one that has almost faded to white in the face of nearly eleven-hundred sunrises. For these past three years she has waited for her son to come home for good. Not on leave, not on vacation, but for good. He was supposed fly in to Ft. Bragg on Monday so she booked a flight to welcome him. That was the original plan. As she packed her levis and checked the itinerary again, he called to let her know that it wouldn't be Monday anymore. He will be delayed for at least another week.

"Sorry mom. There will be no planes flying in or out of Iraq for three days. Bush is coming and that means we are all stuck until he's securely back in the states."

Not that something like this hasn't happened before. In fact, the first time he went to Iraq they said there was a slight possibility he would be sent for a second tour. Then, after his second year spent overseas, they told him he would surely not be sent on a third. Then, while he was away for his third year he was told he would have leave for Christmas, and he spent his holidays in the desert. He would be home by August, and he is still there in January. He has been reactivated, delayed, and extended since "shock and awe" became the U.S. military's motto and truck stops began posting color-coded terrorism levels over their doors.

She wrote to both senators and representative. They all repeated each other.

"I am deeply concerned about the impact multiple deployments are having on our troops and our already-overburdened military."

"My heart goes out to you and your family."

"I appreciate you taking the time to share your concerns."

"Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you or your son."

And it was probably the last reply that bothered her the most. Because, good grief, she did let them know. She just wrote them a letter letting them know what they could do. Send him home. In fact, just send them all home, and let us put our lives back together.

Thune even attached a personal note explaining he would be in Iraq and hoped to see her son. It seems that very few must understand how highly unlikely this is. She thought it was stupid that celebrities would go over and throw special benefit concerts for the troops. Only a select, lucky few ever went to these. You can't honestly believe that a celebrity or politician is going to go anywhere that isn't safe for them, and that's where the troops are; the areas with the most conflict. Where else would they be. It only makes sense.

But, her son must have been more lucky than most, because he came into contact with someone from the best of both worlds; Arnold Schwarzenegger. This poignant moment was described to her in a letter that arrived a month after it occurred. The governor reached out and squeezed her son's limp, clammy hand as he lay dazed in a makeshift hospital bed in Baghdad. Suffering from intense dehydration and heat exhaustion, he barely remembered the words Arnold spoke.

"Get betta solja."

Everyone wants to offer their encouragement. They can't help but hold you down until they've shed a little light on you. So grateful too. Everyone is so eager to thank you for your sacrifice, until your drowning in their gratitude. If you are human, you can imagine why swimming around in so much light and grace can hurt sometimes. When she told an acquaintance that her son was in Iraq for his third year, the woman sweetly sang,

"Well, third time's a charm."

Thinking that a good smack across the face would have been a better reply, she simply nodded. Was that supposed to help? How completely frustrating. How incredibly out-of-touch. Three years of her son's life has been wasted burning shit in a barrel and watching one of his only friends get shot in the head. At least, that is the only one he ever mentioned to her. He wouldn't talk about that anymore. With each year, there were fewer phone calls and fewer letters. Conversations are brief and made even shorter by the echo and fizz that eats up the few words he manages anymore.

The last time he came home to visit, he couldn't even take family pictures. He started a fight at a bar downtown and came home the next morning with scabby lips and a purple bulge of skin covering his right eye. It could be worse. Before that he wrapped his car around an immense oak and spent

two days in the hospital. The worrying did not stop just because he was home. Three years of armed combat and now a life-time prescription to Zoloft.

Three years. Never mind about the number of days, hours, or minutes. That doesn't matter. It has been sixteen birthdays, three Thanksgivings and three Christmases, three weddings, two anniversaries, two high school graduations, and one funeral. It has been watching news reports and writing congressmen. It has been crying in the coat room over lunch hour. It has been "taking it in stride" and "relying on a higher power." It has been waiting to peel that fucking sticker off the window. Then Bush decides to pay a visit, and United Airlines wants a thousand more to switch flights, and she's yelling at someone on the phone because she told them everything and they don't seem to care. And nobody seems to care that it never ends.

## Mercy

Meghan Miller

Pale hands with long fingers, squared at the end, buttoned a light blue dress shirt. They tucked it into a pair of navy blue trousers and fastened a belt. Shaking slightly, they wrapped a tie around his neck. Finished, they rested casually at his side while he looked in the mirror.

He was forty-five now, and his thinning hair created a widow's peak. His face was clean-shaven and it had the pallor of someone who'd been shut away from the sun for a long period of time. The creases on his face indicated not an active outdoor life, but that of someone bent over a desk all day.

He was tall, and his height was made even more evident by his thinness. It looked as if he had spent a solid month fasting for some imagined sin. He pulled on his blazer, and it hung on him in loose folds, the material rolling out at the back when his arms pressed to his sides; it easily could have housed another man.

He turned and surveyed his dim apartment. Aside from a whiskey bottle and an empty glass on the table, all was neatly in place. The couch in its drab upholstery sat in front of the north window, the cushions plumped as full as possible given the age of the brown plaid material. The wood of the arms gleamed from a fresh dusting. The coffee table in front of the couch held tidy stacks of

National Geographic and Reader's Digest. The kitchen glistened from a recent scrubbing, and the dishes, except for that lone glass, were all put away.

He stopped and checked all of his pockets, assuring himself that he was ready. Nothing was missing. His wallet was secure, his keys were in his right hand, and the pistol was in his inside jacket pocket. He walked out, locking the door behind him.

The sun blazed in the early morning as he walked the five blocks to St. Luke's Church. The sky is so blue, he thought, and every sight he passed appeared crisp and clear. The small café, with its green outdoor tables shaded by crisp yellow umbrellas, was ready for the Sunday morning rush. A young woman was sweeping the front entry. He smiled at her and murmured, "Good morning." She nodded, smiled in return, and continued sweeping.

He turned up the walk of the small church. It was a warm red brick with magnificent stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the Bible. One scene was of Moses holding the tablets of God's laws and another was Christ on his journey to be crucified, the pain expressed in a grimace of glass.

The sermon was ending and the congregation had risen for the final hymn when he slipped into the back row of pews. The sound of fifty voices or so, lifted in song, made the man smile grimly. He stood stiffly with his hands folded in front of him in reverence. He glanced up as the elderly pastor glided past him in his white linen robe, tied with a golden cord. His vestment sash, draped in points to his knees, shimmered like an emerald jewel, emphasizing the drooped shoulders. The man was surprised and a little unnerved when the clergyman's eyes met his. He could do nothing but stare

back and hold his breath. Could the pastor know what was in his heart?

The church's occupants started to file out as the last note of the hymn faded in the vaulted ceiling. They each shook the hand of their spiritual leader, wishing him a good day or praising the sermon. He, in turn, blessed them and told them how good it was to see them. Calls of "See you next Sunday," faded out the big double oaken doors.

The church seemed empty and hollow now. The windows cast colors across the dark wooden pews. The candles smoked on the altar, and a stray gust of wind rushed through the bell tower, causing its occupant to let out a resonating tone. He looked down the aisle to the alcove that housed the figure of Christ in Crucifixion.

He slipped from the back row and walked toward this effigy of Christ in his final hour. He sank to his knees at the communion rail. He heard the approach of the elderly churchman. His shuffling feet, catching at the step, emphasized his age and frailty. The man reached into his jacket and slowly withdrew the gun. The aged little man stepped behind the altar and asked the kneeling man, "May I help you, son?"

He slipped the gun back into his pocket and looked up at the robed figure. "My name is Mark Sumpton." He watched the face of the pastor carefully.

"I am Pastor Holbrook." He folded the altar cloth and laid it next to the large Bible. "You seem troubled Mark. Maybe if we talk it will help."

"I don't think anything can help, my life is falling apart and I don't know what to do." Mark folded his hands and rested them on the rail, still looking at the pastor. He searched for a light in the eyes, a recognition of sorts. "I don't know where to start."

"Well let's give it a try. Why do you feel like your life is falling apart?"

"My wife left me last year. I miss her terribly."

"Do you know why she left?"

"I drink too much." Mark shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I lost myself in the bottom of a bottle, and now it is too late to find myself."

"It is never too late." The pastor walked around the altar and placed his gnarled hand on Mark's shoulder. He didn't seem to notice the way that shoulder tensed when he gave it a reassuring squeeze. "What else is bothering you?"

"I found out that I'm dying—cirrhosis of the liver. That's why it's too late." He said it so softly the words clung in the air and whispered past the old man's ear. "I want peace, but I can't find what was destroyed."

"It is not destroyed, Mark."

"I feel so lost, as if God abandoned me." Tears coursed down Mark's face, and his fingers clenched themselves until they turned white. "I've lost my job, my home, family," he paused on a sob. "I've lost everything."

Pastor Holbrook looked intently at Mark and turned to the



Bible. He thumbed through the pages until he found what he wanted. "There are times when we feel so beaten down and our relationship with God is strained. We fear there is no hope for repair." He looked down at the book again and stroked the page lovingly. "First Corinthians 13: 4-8. 'Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; does not behave rudely...rejoices in truth... believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.'"

Mark listened to Holbrook and his face twisted into painful rage. He tried to pray to find that place of forgiveness. It wasn't there. "I used to come here when I was a boy. It was a long time ago, but I was sure you would remember me."

"No, I don't think so, but then I have tended many in this flock." He looked closely at Mark and tried to find a familiar feature.

"Do you know why I started drinking?" He didn't wait for an answer. "When I was a boy I would come to private Bible lessons with the pastor. He would take me in the back room. That one there just behind the altar." He pointed beyond the pastor to a door almost hidden. The pastor turned and looked at him closely. His eyes narrowed at first, but then widened in horror as his memory of a boy connected itself to the face of this man. "He stripped me naked and bent me over the small desk." Mark reached in his pocket once again for the gun.

Holbrook stepped back in terror, his hands raised before him as if to ward off an apparition. Mark raised his pistol and the vested man threw himself to his knees, "Forgive me. Oh God, forgive me!"

"There is no forgiveness for you Pastor Holbrook, not from me."

The pastor clenched his hands in prayer and tears streamed from his rheumy blue eyes. "Why now? Why after all these years?" His eyes pleaded. "Is it vengeance you want?"

"I have nothing to live for, but this." He watched the blubbing man as snot dripped from his nose. "I'm already dying. I have nothing left, not even my family."

"Because of you I have drunk away my life in an effort to forget what you did to me." Mark's voice trembled as it rose in angry memory. "It ruined my marriage and has taken everything from me."

Mark fired the gun above the stooped, quivering old man, hitting the image of Christ in cold stone death with a piercing twang. It echoed in the small church.

"Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord." Holbrook's voice rose in false authority. "Remember his Commandment, 'Thou shall not kill.'"

"God did not listen to my prayers." Mark's face became a mottled red. "He did not help a small helpless boy cornered in a small dark room reeking of burnt candles and immoral sex." Wood cracked and shattered as Mark shot the door of the offensive room. "He did not stop his servant from molesting me."

Pastor Holbrook started rocking back and forth, muttering an indiscernible prayer. Mark pointed the pistol at the pastor's head and raised his eyes to Christ's pained, pitying gaze. Tears coursed down his cheeks as he struggled within himself for the courage to finish it.

## Uncomfortable Shoes

All at once, the frail old clergyman leapt at him, screaming shrilly and raking his nails across Mark's cheek. They struggled violently. As Mark pushed hard against Holbrook, a shot thundered. Mark watched, as if in slow motion, as the pastor's head struck the corner of the marble altar. He saw the slow spread of crimson seep out, framing the white robed figure.

In horror, he fell to his knees crying, and felt a slow burning in his chest. He started coughing, surprised to find his hand sprayed with blood. He looked down and saw the dark stain on his shirt. He started laughing, coughing spasmodically, laughing harder in maniacal irony. The laughter echoed through the nave long after he drew his last breath.

### Stephanie Liebel

I sit with her, on a row of desks and every morning, she'll come flouncing over, complaining her shoes hurt. It's always the same pair, but she loves them because they're "cute." As if shoes are cute. They're just shoes. Pink shoes at that. Light pink shoes, with ribbons and a bow, complete with a kitten heel, a phrase I wouldn't know, except she told me once, and these things stick with me. I tell her how her pink, ribbon-and-bow laden shoes are just shoes, but she doesn't listen. Instead, she accuses me of "being a guy" and wanders the cubicle, looking for other women to agree a cute pair of shoes makes the world go around. She usually doesn't have to go too far to get someone to agree.

After that morning ritual, she plops down beside me at her desk and settles in for a day of very little actual work. "What did you do last night? How's Siri?"

I smile a bit at the mention of my wife. "She's good. We just stayed home. It was a good night. You?"

"I had a great night," she grins. "Just had a movie night at his place. It was quiet. I had the worst time getting up this morning, Billy."

"Why?"

She shrugged, shy suddenly, but her eyes lit up at the same time. "I just did."

Pretty much every morning she gives me up this update. He was sweet, he

was funny, and he let her watch whatever movie she wanted. Every morning, I listen to her, watch that dreamy haze float through her green eyes. When she gets really excited about something spectacular he did, she'll clasp her hands against her cheek, squeeze her legs together, her ankles crossed and hold them straight in front of her, just to let them swing back underneath her chair when she finally pauses to take a breath. Her shoes are usually kicked off by this point, dropped carefully by the wheels of her chair.

"Where did you get those anyway?" I asked one day, as I heard her shoes hit the floor. "Siri's turning into a shoe fiend."

"Payless. They were five dollars, end-of-summer clearance," she replied proudly. She leaned over, held up her right foot, and pointed to the remains of a blister, the skin regrowing over the minor injury. The dead skin was still peeling off. "It's kinda gross," she admitted. "The most disgusting thing I've ever purposefully done to myself."

I looked at her, my work forgotten. "That's from your shoe? Why are you still wearing them?"

She smiled at me, that crooked smile that makes her nose wrinkle a little bit at the corners and hits my shoulder. "Silly! I wear 'em 'cause I love 'em! I can't give that up!"

I didn't want to tell Billy why I couldn't get up this morning, so the subject had to be changed. He would've jumped to the R-rated conclusion, and really, this morning, that just wasn't the case. Truth be told, I was counting the places our bodies overlapped naturally in our sleep. My right ankle over his left. His arm wrapped around my tummy. His hand tucked underneath my body, keeping the bottom of my back folded into the soft skin over his stomach. Our fingers intertwined on my right shoulder. As his procession of alarm clocks buzzed in the early daylight (he has a hard time waking up

in the morning) I sink into my memories of last night. We just slept. I can't remember the last time that happened, but it gave me immeasurable comfort. Just sleeping.

We watched a movie and curled up in his bed, my nose cold from the fan he keeps on overnight. I snuggled into his back, my eyelashes brushing his shoulder blade as I squished my body into his, making him chuckle softly. He reached his hand behind him, between our bodies, took my hand and wrapped it around his chest, clutching my fingers against him. By the time I woke up this morning, right before the first round of alarm clocks, we'd rolled over, his arms around my body, his breath making the tiny hair on the back of my neck tingle. While he slept, I stayed as still as possible, except to turn off all the alarm clocks. The buzzing is just too much to handle sometimes.

We've all been waiting for some time to meet him. All of the students in our office, we're pretty close. At least once a week we try and meet up for a movie or a drink or a pizza or something. Something to keep us attached, so we can sit on each other's desks and talk about completely inappropriate things. Something to keep us friends. He never comes to these parties.

One night this summer we all watched a movie at our fellow employee Amy's apartment. On the way over, Stephanie clapped her hands together. "Ooo! Guess what! He said he'd come to the movie night tonight!"

I pulled the visor down, blocking the glaring sunlight I was driving into. "Yeah? Is he going to meet us there?"

"Well, no," she replied, pulling down her own visor. "I asked him this afternoon if he wanted to join us, and he said he'd think about it and then I just talked to him before you picked me up and now he's eating at Cubby's with some of his friends but he said when they're done, he'll totally call."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Yeah!" She grinned and bounced a little in the seat.

He never showed. She was quiet about it, and she still joined in the post-movie conversation, never once bringing up his name. She still laughed at my silly stories. The drive back across town was pretty quiet though.

I pulled to a stop in front of her building and she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Hey, thanks for driving."

"No problem," I thought about giving her an anecdote, something to focus on instead of his absence, but couldn't come up with anything.

She climbed out of the Jeep, digging in her purse for her phone. "Tell Siri I say hi."

"I will," I murmured as she slammed the door shut. I waited for her to walk into her building, but she offered me a small smile and half wave as she hit two buttons on her phone and pressed it to her ear.

I stomp up the steps to his apartment, my flip flops smacking against the bottom of my heels. His door's locked even though he knows I'm on my way over. I bang my open palm into the door and in a second he unlocks it and lets the door drift open.

I swing the screen door wide open and kick off my shoes, letting both doors slam behind me. "Can't even say hi?"

"Well, you didn't look super thrilled to see me, Steph." He paused, pointing over my shoulder. "And if you came over here to fight, there's the door."

"I didn't come over here to fight," I spit back, pushing past him to his bedroom. His roommate's door is shut but I know he's listening to every word leave my lips, so I do my best to keep my voice down.

He followed me into his room and shut the door. We stood, the bed between

us as we both began to disrobe to go to bed. "I told all my friends you were gonna be there tonight."

"I was busy!" He jerked his t-shirt off and replaced his jeans with mesh shorts.

"You weren't busy when I asked this afternoon." I rounded the bed and unhooked his beaded necklace for him. "But Paul comes acallin' and all the sudden Silly Stephanie and her silly, silly friends are an afterthought."

"We'd been planning to eat at Cubby's all week."

"I'm sure, my dear," I drape his necklace over a hook with the rest of his other jewelry on his desk.

"We were."

Back on my side of the bed, I jerk my hoodie off. "Then why didn't you just tell me this afternoon you couldn't make Amy's movie night?"

He was silent as he pulled back the comforter and crawled into bed.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." I bounce onto the mattress beside him, yanking the sheet and blankets my way. "Can we turn off the damn fan? It seriously gets cold in here at night."

"Yes," he mutters, almost defeated.

With the fan off, the room falls still and when he sighs it reverberates in my ears. "You gonna be pissy with me all night?"

"You gonna keep blowing me off all the time?"

"Oh, come here," he slips his hand over my pelvic bone and I try to fight rolling to him, but he's got more strength in his hand than I do in my whole body. Eye to eye, I try to look even more disappointed than I am.

"Oh, look at that pouty lip..." he whispers after a second. "Steph's a sad little puppy. Got the big, sad eyes. Super, super sad and pouty." His gently pulls my bottom lip out, exaggerating my expression. "Steph's gotta be careful with that pouty lip or else it's gonna get stuck!"

I hold the lip out for just a minute longer and finally smile. "You're a dork."

He wraps his arms around me and I push my nose into the crook of his shoulder. "Oh Steph...you like it."

One day she's bright, she's sunny, she's downright giggly. One text message from him before lunch and she clutches her phone to her chest, flutters her eyes and does her "sigh!" She's ready to joke with me, listen to the silly double entendres tumble from my lips. It isn't as hard to make her laugh. In fact, on days like these, she's usually laughing at me before I even open my mouth. Yet, by the next day, I watch her out of the corner of my eye as she checks her phone a thousand times before ten am.

After watching her glance around the office to make sure no one's watching and dive into her purse for her phone, I clear my throat. "Are you waiting for your mom to call again?"

She paused, her purse dangling from her fingertips. "Um...yeah."

I turn back to my computer screen, like I'm working on something pressing. "If your mom needs you, doesn't she just call your office phone?"

She put her purse back down by her feet. "Yeah."

He'd been out of town for a few days so when he came back early one Tuesday afternoon, when I hadn't been expecting him until Wednesday night, I was stoked.

I met him for lunch at his place. He was waiting for me out on the front porch

in the sunshine, a cigarette dangling between his fingers. "Do you always get this dressed up for work?"

"Well, its summer so I'm fulltime right now," I stopped walking towards him and looked down at my outfit. "It's just a skirt and some sandals..."

I paused and hopped out of my shoes and walked up the porch steps barefoot. "Really uncomfortable shoes."

He took one from me and looked at the kitten heel. "How in the hell do you walk in these?"

"I don't," I laughed. "They spend most of their time under my desk."

"Ouch," he grimaced and tossed his cigarette onto the sidewalk below to bum out. He leaned in to kiss me, but stopped suddenly.

"What?" I asked.

"You've got band aids all over your feet." He paused. "Are those blisters from these shoes?"

I shrugged. "Beauty is pain, babe."

"I think it's more like just a pain...a big one."

We all know when she's trying to hide how upset she gets because of him. We can all tell when she's bothered by not having that title, by not hearing certain words she's certain he feels and just won't say. She blankly stares at her computer screen, her hand resting on the mouse, not moving. Looking, but not seeing. Sometimes it takes her a second to focus when say her name. On those days, there are no stories about late night trips to the elementary school playground, nothing about how he just grabbed her face and kissed her, her cheeks squished and her arms, in surprise, flying around his neck to pull him closer. It's those days she's propped up on my desk, her

pleated skirt fanned around her legs, those uncomfortable shoes dropping to the floor by my chair as her feet swing in space.

"My feet hurt," she says finally.

"Well, stop wearing shoes that hurt," I reply.

For awhile this summer, when he still let me talk to his friends, I'd stay home on weeknights, and he'd go downtown for a drink or five with his buddies and call me when it was time to go home. One night, I tracked him down outside one of the bars and when he climbed in my car he immediately took control of the radio, like he always does. He found a song he liked, and all the way to his place, he danced in my passenger seat, shaking his shoulders. "Oh my god, Steph! We gotta download this song when we get home!"

"All right," I grinned at him, thankful I didn't have to be to work until ten the next morning.

In his room, he collapsed into his desk chair, pulling me with him. "Ok, I can't even really see straight right now so you gotta download it and type the words in for me. I'll tell ya how, don't worry."

"I never worry," I replied, opening the music downloading program we all use.

"Why don't you just lean back and relax," I suggested, kissing his forehead.

"I'll take care of it."

He nestled into my shoulder. "You're the best!"

I smiled. "I know." When the song downloaded, he still wiggled away, despite my suggestion to chill out.

"Is it done? Play it! Oh man, you gotta play it."

I hit the play button and he sprang out of his chair, holding me around the waist so I didn't go flying. He turned the volume way up on his speakers and

I dove across the desk to turn it back down again. "Baby, it's nearly two-thirty in the morning. Your neighbors downstairs will freak out. No loud music."

"Well, you know what Steph?" He leaned over, cranked up the volume back up, and yelled over the pounding. "They can just kiss my ASS!"

I went to turn it down again, but he slapped my hand. "No!"

"Babe!"

"You gotta dance instead!" He grabbed me then, swung me into a more open space in his bedroom, pulled my hips right to him and started dancing like he did the night we met in the bars so long ago.

"Sweetheart—"

"Dance, Steph!" He tightened his grip on me, and held me against his body as we swayed with the bass. After a bit, I forgot how late it was and started dancing on my own free will with him, our knees bumping, my arms in the air.

"Whoa baby!" He yelled. "Why don't you dance like this downtown?"

"Cause you never let me go downtown with you!"

"Next time I will, babe!" He slides closer to me. "I promise."

I stick up my pinkie finger in front of his face. "You gotta pinkie swear it."

He swung his pinkie through mine, our hips still moving to the bass. "I pinkie swear it."

He isn't all we talk about.

We have office rituals: daily trips to the water machine in the lunchroom, air high fives, my daily threat to play her saved drunk voicemail she sent me one

Friday night, her constant "when I was a young English major" teasing. Our commonalities go beyond the cubicle, beyond our similar majors, beyond typical rules.

Today we were standing around a buffet table at work, holding our napkins and paper plates, talking about a professor we've both had at different semesters.

"Something about her is..." My sentence trailed off, and I couldn't think of the word I wanted, so I looked at Stephanie, waved my hands a bit, my paper plate still empty, or potato chips would've caught air.

"Oh, I know!" she agreed without skipping a beat, eyeing a cupcake with sprinkles. "That woman just has the most absurd teaching style. "Like, I'm not excited about this class" She looked back at me from her sprinkles.

"She's tough to listen to," I added enthusiastically. "It's like—"

"She has no life experience to back up what she's teaching," she finished.

"Exactly!" I throw her my air high five, which she returned enthusiastically over bags of chips and empty rice crispy bar pans. Somewhere in that head of hers, she deciphered what I was trying to say and took the next step herself. I keep waiting for her to do that with him.

On Monday, I sat beside her at work and waited for my computer to boot up. "Hey."

"Hi," she sent me a weak smile.

"How was your weekend?"

She shrugged. "Fine. Yours?"

"Really great." I look at her again and know something happened, something

that probably included guilt-tripping text messages following a fight after she stands up for herself and slams the door on the way out.

By Tuesday she's talking again. "Did you and Siri do anything fun last night?"

"Oh, just the usual."

Wednesday will roll around and she actually laughs. "Hey, Stephanie?"

"Hey yeah?" She looks at me and keeps eye contact for more than a second.

"You haven't talked much the last couple days."

She paused then, focusing back on the sales literature she's updating. After a minute, she'll sigh and talk again, softly, so no one else can hear. Her lips barely move. "I'm tired of defending him," she murmurs. "It's just easier not to talk at all."

I walked into his apartment one morning, red and yellow leaves brushing over my heels. Winter was near; I could feel it. It made me nervous, but I hadn't yet figured out why. It was like something was coming, something I wasn't ready for. Most days I zoned the light frost on my windshield out, but some days, days like today, I couldn't. It was like the frost, as light and easy to scrape away as it was, it stuck around, ruining bits and pieces of my day if I let it.

"Hey," he called from his bedroom as I kicked my shoes off. "What are you doing here?"

"Early morning visit," I rounded the corner to his room, where he was sitting at his desk. "Thought I would see how you feel today, after the headache last night rendered you unable to take me to dinner."

"I really did have a headache," he looked up at me as I shrugged my jacket off and propped myself on his thigh.

"I know, babe," I kissed his forehead, along his hair line.

"I sense a 'though' coming. Or maybe a well placed 'but'." He nudged me.

Forcing a laugh, I absently scratched the back of his neck. "There's a joke in there somewhere..."

He sighed. "You're mad, aren't you?"

"Do you blame me?" I brush the hair from my eyes, eager to read regret on his face.

"I felt bad, I did. I do."

I shrugged and stood back up. "I'm glad you feel better. I gotta get to work."

He watched me put my jacket on and followed me into the living room, where he watched me slip my heels back on. "I'll make it up, I promise."

Buttoning my jacket, I looked at him skeptically. "Like that time you said you'd let me go downtown with you and your friends. Yeah, you really followed through there."

He blinked, obviously surprised I had the guts to say it and offered me his pinkie finger. "I pinkie swear."

I hooked my pinkie through his and held up my other hand's pinkie. "Make it a double and we'll call it a deal."

A couple weeks ago, Amy moved out of our cubicle, so Stephanie took the empty desk beside me. I was helping her peel old tape of a shelf when Amy visited, pretend annoyed the desk had been claimed so quickly.

Peeling the tape of the metal shelf, she looked at Amy's purple and black heels with a big grin. "Life can't be that bad. You've got super cute shoes on today."

I stopped peeling the tape, fed up with her flippant tone. "It isn't all about cute shoes. The world isn't perfect just because somebody went to Payless and paid less for shoes she kicks under her desk."

She paused in her tape peeling, narrowed her eyes a little, like something I said finally broke through the barrier of embraced naiveté. She smiled at me then (I thought there was a fight coming) and she crooked her head to the right as she went back to her tape peeling. "Cute shoes are everything. They make me happy. So deal."

Billy's words, for some reason, stuck with me. After Amy left, my smiles gone, I sat back down at my desk, the tape peeling forgotten. Hoping Billy wouldn't notice, I felt around under my desk for my heels. I slipped them back on and then stood up and five minutes later I climbed into my car, my feet aching.

At home, I kicked off the heels in my bedroom. Pulling my knees to my chest on the floor, I looked at the bandages covering my right foot, like a new skin. I peeled back one of the plastic edges. The greasy band aid left a rounded dirt mark near my big toe, and I kept pulling the bandage off. I pulled the next two off as well, faster, and examined my foot.

Four blisters covered by three band aids. Ridiculous. I pulled two bandages off my left foot and grabbed my pink heels off the floor. I stuffed them inside my closet, on a hidden shoe rack in back. Billy was right. They weren't everything. And they sure as hell weren't making me happy.

She taped a picture of the two of them together up over her desk a couple weeks ago, so at least I know what he looks like. They look truly happy, sitting at a singing competition, his content meant for her. Her hair's even more shiny than normal from the festive Christmas tree lights swinging from the ceiling. Both of them have their eyes open wide, anticipating the flash.



Last night, when I called him, he said someone else had beaten me to the punch. I'd gone downtown with my friends, for once, and after a prolonged silence from him on the phone, I stood up from my friends and told them to come looking for me in fifteen minutes if I hadn't come back. I knew they'd find me if I needed them to.

He did end up taking another girl home. I never did see her, but I went to the bar where he was, watched him sing a round of karaoke. His friends were sitting at the same table we had the night my favorite picture of us ever had been snapped. His friends, by the way, all turned to look at me and not one of them said hi.

Still, the next morning, I found myself walking up the porch steps to his door. He unlocked the door for me, disappeared back into his room and I followed him in, peeling the bed sheets and blankets from the mattress as fast as I could.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asked.

"Are you still drunk?" I shrug a feather pillow from its case, trying not to look for hair even a shade darker than mine.

"No..." he teetered to the left a little, bumping into his desk. "Well, yeah. I guess. Put my sheets back on."

"Did you have sex with her?"

He didn't say anything and I turned to stare at him.

"I blacked out as soon as I got home, Steph."

My face was burning as I ripped the bottom sheet off so quickly it almost flew off the mattress. "Did you wake up naked?"

"No. I had my shorts on."

"Good." I threw his knotted up sheets right at him and went to his closet to find the extra blankets. "In my experience you usually don't put your shorts back on."

Later on, while he washed dishes, splashing more water on his t-shirt than in the sink, I pulled a blanket off his bed, wrapped it around my shoulders and slid to the floor in front of his closet.

He has special hangers for his sweaters. On the floor, he stores his shoes on a closet-wide shoe rack. He has work boots, running shoes, dress shoes, hunting boots, flip flops, Doc Martins and about a thousand pairs of Sketchers in black and brown and blue and white and gray. He only wears the black ones.

I crawled into his closet, looked up at all the sleeves, their dark holes ultimately leading nowhere. It smelled like him in here, his cologne, mixed with cigarette smoke and his bodywash. His lotion and his laundry detergent and his mother's cookies from back home. I smell his skin, after a night at the bar, after dancing and laughing and spilling beer on dry-clean only sweaters. I smell the wind in his hair as we hold hands and sneak through the elementary school playground at two am, looking for a setting for our newest adventure. I smell the snow on his hands as he kissed me the night before Christmas last year, when everything was still easy to navigate and right.

He walked into his room and saw me in the closet, the doors wide open.

"Should I even ask?"

I nod to his row of Sketchers. "How come you only wear the black ones?"

"They're the most comfortable," he put his bed back together. "They're getting thin in the heel. I'll have to buy new ones soon."

I couldn't even look at him. "Yeah, I think you will too."

When she talks about him I'm spared picturing their movie nights and their playground romps, and two am dances to thumping music, driving his neighbors crazy. I mean, I'm not really trying to picture all that but even if I wanted to, I couldn't. Maybe it's that I've never met him, can't even begin to see him the way she does, not that I really want to either.

You know what I see when she talks about that stuff? Her pink, kitten heel shoes, the ribbons weaved through the top of the shoe, still pristine, the bottoms scuffed from days and days of wear, even though the only place she really wears the shoes is to and from her car. The heel, so delicate, if she steps wrong, she'll break it. When she's talking about him, giggly or sad, pissed off or relieved, exasperated or completely head over heels in love him, I only see her shoes, lying beside his bed, in a room I won't picture, abandoned, like they were kicked off in a hurry.

Outside my office building, I ran inside, my tennis shoes pounding the pavement. It felt good to run. I never could in kitten heels.

In the office, I jogged through the maze of cubicles and slid into my desk chair so hard I hit my desk, making my monitor wobble on the stand. "Billy! Guess what?"

"Hey," he looked up, smiled. "What?"

"You gotta guess!"

"Uh...you're actually gonna work today?" He grinned at me.

"No! Well, yes! But that's not it." I paused, knowing how proud he would be of me. "I ended it." I pushed my legs up in the air, straight from my knees to my toes. I took a deep breath and my legs swung underneath my chair.

"I did it. I ended it."

He smiled at me, but kept shuffling papers, like we were discussing our

afternoon trip to the water machine, like this sort of thing happened every day. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't think it hit me, but I did it this morning and...I'm ok, so far."

"I'm glad to hear that." Billy sat back in his chair. He nodded to my feet, swinging underneath my chair. "I've never seen those shoes before."

I held up my black Sketchers. "Bought 'em yesterday. And they're comfortable! Who knew?"

Billy smiled again and turned back to his computer screen. "Well, at least you got your priorities in order."

"Yeah," I took a deep breath and wiggled my toes in my shoes. "I think I did."





## Left Behind

Stephanie Bouman

It's been here for a while  
The tattered ruins of yesterday  
Still clinging to  
Its sorrowful memories  
Buried by the rubble now

A new age has drifted over it  
Slowly changing the face of my past  
Tugging at loose threads  
Trying to undo the knots  
Of a reminder of what was

Thick black smoke and dust  
Have long since been washed away  
The memory is still burned  
Within the folds of my brain  
A white scar left

## Where I Come From

2nd Place—Poetry

Margaret Greene

I come from a loving mother and father  
I come from my homeland where the wild animals roamed once.  
I come from the wild horses running in the whispering wind  
That's where I come from

I come from the Pow-wows where dancers  
Would move to the beat of the drum.  
I come from my homeland, where people before me were free.  
That's where I come from

I come from the people that I live by.  
I come from the people all around me  
I come from the people that I've never seen or heard of.  
I come from the people who dislike me and love me.  
That's where I come from.

3rd Place—Poetry

## Tire Swing

Malea Nelson

I am like a tire swing  
Kids count on me for support  
As they continue to grow  
Both physically and mentally

I am like a tire swing  
Always busy, busy, busy  
Swinging back and forth  
Freely in the breeze

I am like a tire swing  
Everyone quiet and still  
Suddenly I'm alone  
Swaying in the breeze

123

## More Than It Seems

1st Place—Prose

Elizabeth Bosworth

I had a dream once, and it wasn't good. The whole of it was despicable and horrifying, but not in a normal way—if horror can ever be normal. For days afterward, the very thought of it haunted not only my thoughts but also my steps. The most ordinary objects held connotations of dread. I cannot begin to explain or understand for to this day they terrify me. A robin singing once made me think of new leaves and warm days; I now taste the sweet tang of blood, feel the sticky scarlet of it on my own two hands, and I am afraid. When such dreams occur, they are often explained away as simple delusion of the mind or some tearing of the senses, but it was, is, so real, that to me it simply is.

Going about this dream is not to be considered simply or shortly or orderly for that is the very stuff of the setting. Seen from my eyes I'm in the story yet away from it. I am my eyes yet I can see those places in the story where I don't exist. Have no way in the physical world of seeing, yet I do; therefore, the story may seem confusing to you, this ebb and flow of perception, but I shall try my best.

It's noon, and I've never seen a more idyllic place. Houses in perfect rows, immaculately kept—trimmed emerald grass, seamless white paint and crystal windows. The streets have no litter and the road signs have new paint. I hear the liquid song of a robin gracing the air, and I breathe grass and the cool, creeping humidity of spring from the height of my advantage. For I am in a tall place some four stories up under a wooden roof held up by four square

pillars at the corners with a waist-high wall all around the edge; and even though I'm atop, I start to see the building from below. It's all red brick and gray mortar, something like a military watchtower, lacking doors, stairs, or any discernible way up.

Someone is speaking. I turn in; and while my eyes adjust to the dimmer light, I take that in, too. Now I realize that there are other people here. Some sit in brown, unfinished, wood pews; and some stand, talking casually. Nothing abnormal until a man rises in a lift outside the tower. He has rather handsome features, dark brown hair, a narrow strong nose, and driven, determined gray-blue eyes. He doesn't strike me as unusual except that he is outside, and I know—I guess I did at the beginning—that no one inside the structure was aware of him prior to his rising. He is speaking now, conferring with several men in the building. After a time the lift lowers, humming with hydraulics, and I notice the other men walking back toward the others. Some time passes; I just stand where I am, and always have been, until the lift is again heard, and as it rises just within my vision, I hear the first blast. There are more lifts; and this time when the men fire into this room of people, I hear the women scream. The shots are rapid now; there is no holding them back. Everyone runs to the back of the room, but one man is screaming at them, and finally he screams at me telling me to get everyone down on the floor, under the pews. I did as the man told me, yelling at the panic-crazed people, but no one listens. The man is coming back towards me; and as he does, he jerks in time with a bang, and I hear his ribs crack and explode and see his flesh fly. He's closer to me now, pushed by the gun blast, taking me down with his fall as he whispers, "Down."

So I stay down. I realized that the blood running slick across the floor is not just that of the man next to me; it is the blood of many, and as this scarlet river is drying, I breathe its tang and taste its iron. I feel nothing. It occurs to me that the shots are done, that no one in the room is moving; so I stand.

The bodies are everywhere but mostly at the back of the building where they tried to escape but where cut down like twisting trees in a storm. One body in particular catches my eye. It is a young boy, probably four or five years of age, face down, and he isn't breathing. I can see the floor through his stomach. I feel nothing. Finally, I walk to the edge and hang my head outside into the sun that is slightly lower in the sky. Looking down, I see tread marks in the grass from the life and blood on the ground. A woman fell down. Her ebony hair fans delicately, obscuring her face. I feel nothing. The houses are the same, all white and shining; and then a robin's liquid song fills my ear. Light trilling notes that come not from purpose, but some

God-given instinct; but it isn't any robin. It's the same one as before. It hits me square in the chest and sears my soul. I'm on fire, in agony, and I finally realize what I've witnessed, and even though I know it's not real and I'm back in my room; I know this thing will haunt me 'til the very day that I die. I know it will be as real to me as if it had actually happened, because in some small way it did.

2nd Place—Prose

## Untitled

### Brandy Bartels

I am Segrina and am sixteen years old. I lived in Austria with my parents, my elder brother, and five younger brothers and sisters. I enjoyed singing, running, and writing. I had dark, curly hair, hazel eyes, and skin the color of the banks along the creek. Despite my good looks, I was always an outcast in normal society. My mother always told me that I was special, that others just didn't understand, but even she didn't know what Germany and her Nazi army would do to us just because they didn't understand us. I was a Gypsy during World War Two.

I was going to school in another city when the war started. Every semester I would board a train with my best friend as well as several others our age and travel for a day and a night to school. One year after the war began the Nazi army found the train on the way to the Gypsy school. I remember the train lurching to a stop, and the fearful whispers of all the girls in my car. Stories of bravery and cruelty have followed and haunted those who left that train alive. The soldiers began to separate us, those who could work and those who couldn't. They tapped me to leave the train, but not my friend. When the soldier turned his back, I urged my friend to come with me, he would never know. However, he turned just as we were leaving our seats. Before I could even begin to understand what was happening, the soldier pulled his pistol and shot my friend through her head. Her body crumpled at my feet, her empty eyes stared at my own. Shrieks of the other girls made



up for the lack of my own. The soldier was already shoving me off the train. Looking back now; I believe that God bestowed an extra kindness to my friend. She was one of the lucky ones who did not experience the pain and abuse that the rest of us did.

I have managed to learn and piece together other stories about my classmates from those who survived with me. One boy jumped between his girlfriend and an impending bullet and shielded her body with his dead body. After the soldiers left her car, she was able to slip out and join us outside. A week later, she was shot to death in a random shoot out. Another girl managed to slip her little sister out a window. She was shot through the stomach and left for dead, just before they blew up the train. From what I know, her little sister got away. There are just a few of the stories from a single night. Those memories pale in comparison to what we suffered in the concentration camps we were sent to.

I personally spent three years in Therendstat, a concentration camp in northern Austria. After that time, I was so weak and thin that I could wrap my hands clear around my ribs. The yearly check ups from the German doctors had become extremely difficult to pass during the last year. I could sense the inevitable fast approaching. Finally, in 1943, I was removed from the work force and sent to shower. I clearly remember the overweight woman who gave me a bar of perfumed soap and took the rags they had given me for clothes. There was a large group of us forced into that room. I looked up, expecting to see showerheads, but instead I saw holes in the ceiling. The hiss of gas flooding the cramped room resembled the screeching of my own dying soul. The screams of children, mothers, and elderly echoed in my ears as I desperately tried to hold on to life. But, after the horrors I had seen, the strength I had lost, I could not hold on. My body gave up its last breath peacefully and slowly sank into an eternity of darkness, so much better than the darkness of what had been done to me and my people, as well as,

thousands of other Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other minorities.

Although rumors of American soldiers coming to liberate us had been whispered through the camp for months before I was gassed, I never got to see the hoped for flag of.

America. I died almost a year before any soldier stepped foot in Therendstat, or any other concentration camp.

Despite my short life, I experienced and witnessed more horrors that anyone will in ten times the time I was on this Earth. I saw more cruelty than most can even fathom. I was stripped of my identity, given only a number for recognition, and recorded in history books everywhere as only a statistic, just another unknown face that went through a hard time. All my friends, the boy and girl, the two sisters, my best friend, and myself will never be known as anything but faceless bodies, ashes blowing in the wind. But along with the ashes, the wind also carries a whisper, the sound of children singing while moving in a caravan from city to city, the cries of frightened school kids on the train in early winter, the whistle of bullets narrowly missing you only to hit your comrade just an inch away and the shrieks of mothers, children, and grandparents as life is slowly replaced with gas and death overcomes them. While we cannot tell our story any more, the legacy of the Holocaust will live on. Through numbers, survivors' tales, and the remembrance of millions around the world, the victims of the Nazi death camps can have a voice again. Despite our cruel, short lives, we will be heard. May our songs carry on in the hearts of children everywhere.

## A Brother's Love

3rd Place—Prose

Brandy Bartels

Jordan, I'm hungry; and my feet hurt. When are we going to stop?"

Seventeen-year-old Jordan looked back over his shoulder at his sister. Six years old, a scrawny little, brown-haired girl whose filthy, flower print dress hung like a tent on her tired body.

"I don't know, Ella, but soon. The valley that Da...that we heard about is just over this next hill." Jordan's desperate attempt to catch himself failed. Ella dropped onto the ground and burst into silent tears, her frail body wracking with sobs.

Jordan and Ella were pioneer children. Their parents had sold all their land and livestock in order to move west. However, about three days earlier, their parents had been tragically killed when their wagon tipped over. Jordan had managed to drag Ella away from the scene, but not before she had seen her mother covered in blood, arms and legs stretched at odd angles. Ella had been suffering from shock and hadn't cried until now.

As tears poured forth, Jordan realized just how vulnerable she really was. He was filled with an emotion only a brother can feel, a deep desire to make the world perfect for his sister.

He was so caught up in this feeling that he didn't see the shadow moving behind Ella, didn't hear the tell-tale rumble of a creature that hasn't fed in many days.

The attack came quickly and without warning. In two leaps the shadow cat was behind Jordan, his beloved sister clamped in its jaws. Without thinking he pounced toward the feline. He was prying its jaws open when it changed its mind. Faster than the eye could catch it, Ella was released, gasping; and Jordan's head hit the ground, his throat hanging open.

Just as the mountain lion was about to enjoy a long awaited meal, a shot rang through the air. The cat fell, while a medium tall, muscular man ran down the hill in front of them. When he reached the girl she was kneeling by the six foot two, sandy haired, lanky boy who looked like a military cadet. She didn't shed a tear, only caressed his head gently. She tenderly raised his head to plant one lone kiss on his forehead and whisper a swift goodbye. She felt strong but gentle hands slowly lift her to her feet, then a warm, loving hand took hers and led her over the hill and into the valley, soaked with the warm colors of the sunset.

Through the clouds above drifted a final farewell as the smiling boy turned and stepped through the golden gates into the paradise where he would await his little sister.